

Address to National TAFE Council Annual General Meeting – 2006

Federal TAFE President – Linda Simon

Delegates

The Howard Government has significantly changed the political and industrial landscape in which we, as teacher unionists, live and work. As a consequence, the campaigning that we must undertake this year and in the lead-up to the Federal elections, is more critical than any we have undertaken before.

In winning the 2004 federal elections and in gaining control of both houses of Parliament, the Howard Government has placed itself in a position to wage an attack on both public education and unionism, along with other aspects of our lives that we hold dear. There is no doubt that we are clearly in their sights.

First, the Howard Government has made its intention to undermine unionism and the rights of workers to collective bargaining, apparent through the Industrial Relations legislation, Workchoices, and consequent Bills. The impact of this will be felt most significantly from March this year, but as political commentators have noted, for many workers the changes have been designed to have greatest impact after the next federal elections. The undermining of the ability of teacher unions to work effectively is an apparent aim of the Howard Government. Not only do we represent some 160,000 members across Australia, in a highly unionised and focussed workforce, but we also relentlessly take a stand for a quality public education system and the use of taxpayers' money to fund that system properly for the advantage of the majority of Australians. At the same time the values that we espouse, are the antithesis of those practised by the Howard Government. We take a public stand, and must continue to do so, for those most underprivileged in this society, including refugees and those whom big business and international agreements, seek to further disadvantage. We take a stand for social justice issues, for which the Howard Government has again and again shown total disdain.

Up until last year, the Howard Government's most obvious means of undermining TAFE public vocational education and training and our work, was through decreased funding. Figures in the Research Officers' report shows that Commonwealth real expenditure for VET per Annual Hour Curriculum has decreased by around 24% from 1997 to 2004. However, last year's demands were far more pointed, with national agreements and Skilling Australia's Workforce Act making it clear where funding must be allocated.

Whilst none of us doubt the need for increased funding for skills shortage areas, such as trades, welfare, childcare and others, with no additional funding on offer, this can only mean that funding is taken from other program areas including those that make up TAFE's second chance and further education role. Increased amounts of funding that could be directed to the TAFE sector are being handed out in specific grants such as the toolboxes for apprentices.

When there was a decision by state and territory Ministers at the June MINCO meeting to review employer subsidies, the Federal Minister Brendan Nelson just bypassed the decision, and held one of those reviews which are not really about achieving any change. The Federal Ministers' continuing disparaging comments about TAFE offering hobby courses, and the requirement that no federal funding be used for these, is also an indication of the move to refocus the operations of TAFE. As teachers we are aware, that today's supposed hobby course can be tomorrow's small business success.

At the same time, the Commonwealth has continued to underfund the Adult Migrant Education Service, and to waste taxpayers' money on poor competitive funding practices, with the result that many migrants are not receiving the education and English support that they deserve.

Through 2005, Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson made his views on our inclusion in the VET debate apparent by refusing to meet with us in the TAFE area, whilst Gary Hardgrave, Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, sent a barrage of media releases attacking teacher unions, TAFE teachers and any state or territory government that also took a stand for public education.

These are two examples which highlight these attacks and the misinformation being promulgated by the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, who now appears intent as well in changing VET to VTE.

In May 2005, he accused us of 'pure politicking and disrupting the training for people enrolled in TAFE'. He said that the AEU was wrong in its statements regarding TAFE funding, and that we simply highlighted our control of the Australian Labor Party. It is rather interesting to note in this same media release he said that: "TAFE is not and never has been run by the Commonwealth Government, but rather by the States and Territories." Given the continuing moves by his Government to wrest that control from State and Territory Governments, it is a curious statement to make.

In August last year, he put out a very nasty and critical media release targeted at the NSW Minister for Education and Training, Carmel Tebbutt. He said that "Ms Tebbutt's misguided approach, dictated to her by her misguided union bosses, means she will continue to preside over a second rate system that lags behind other states like Victoria and Queensland." He also said that: "By focusing solely on AWAs, Ms Tebbutt is turning her back on all training stakeholders missing the point about the key clients of training – the students and business. The Australian Government's only requirement is that teachers are offered AWAs – we want to reward quality teachers for quality work."

As we well know, the Federal Government is not just requiring the offering of AWAs through the Act, but demanding far greater control over many operational aspects of vocational education and training. In their VET Plans for 2006, state and territory governments were instructed quite clearly by the Federal Government through DEST, of the actual words that had to be used in the Plans to meet the Commonwealth's requirements. This has also been the experience of the university sector. The Howard Government appears intent on challenging and undermining TAFE's role in vocational education and training in this country.

It is well known that on a visit to China in 2005, Gary Hardgrave criticised the Australian TAFE system, a system which he is meant to represent as Minister, in discussions with the Chinese authorities.

The role of the Prime Minister and COAG, has been interesting. Changes to the VET sector and the issues around skills shortages, have been removed from the education sphere and made the responsibility of Premiers and the Prime Minister through COAG debate. The impact of this on apprenticeships, length of training, standards and regulations that will affect educational delivery and results, is of concern. It is unfortunately indicative of the lack of commitment of many state and territory governments overall to the type of TAFE system that we, students and the community want and need.

The Skilling Australia's Workforce Act, with its width of demands, attempts to establish the way ahead for vocational education and training in this country, according to the ideology of the Howard Government. These demands can be summarised as increased privatisation of vocational education and training, reduction of government funding for TAFE and the shifting of costs to students and businesses, increased competition in the VET sector, implementation of industrial relations changes, and increased control of VET by the Federal Government at the expense of the state and territory governments.

Through a variety of mechanisms, the Howard Government has also moved to reduce the say of unions and the community in the VET system. Gone are the days of tripartite discussions, for the Industry Skills Councils for a start are far more weighted in favour of big business, than unions or other stakeholder groups. This support by the Government for employer groups was made even more apparent with the recent establishment of the National Institute for Trades Skills Excellence, with only three Board members, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), the Australian Industry Group (AIG) and the National Farmers Federation (NFF). These groups will make decisions about preferred providers of training, whereas they themselves all have connections with private RTOs. That such a group can be established with little comment or outrage from the Australian public is a sad indication of the Howard Government's skewing of society's views on such organizations. We thought we had little enough representation through the previous VET arrangements and the ANTA Board. Now we have much less.

The recently announced review of the operations of the National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), which I will speak more about in my NCVER report, is a further move towards Commonwealth control. Gary Hardgrave has made his views around the Federal Opposition's ability to use NCVER statistics to criticise the Government quite apparent, and the review appears to be aimed at giving the Government greater control over the conduct, publication and dissemination of VET research. We have to wonder what will come next!

I started the TAFE President's address today, by commenting on the critical campaigning that we must undertake this year and in the lead-up to the Federal elections. One of the issues that will make this even more difficult for us this year, is the uncertain position that the Federal Government's IR legislation puts us in.

The situation varies from state to state and territory to territory, depending upon which jurisdiction we are registered in and whether the TAFE system in that state or territory is considered to be a 'constitutional corporation' or not. Not surprisingly, labour lawyers have different views on these issues and different suggestions as to our best responses. Most of us are still negotiating or discussing the issues involved in this legislation with our state and territory governments, as is the case with the offering of AWAs or individual contracts in different areas. One thing we do know is that our respective governments feed off each other. Therefore if one state or territory government is able to implement changes to their advantage, but not to ours as teachers in TAFE and public education, then the rest are likely to attempt to follow. There will also be a round of state and territory government elections, starting this year, that could also have a significant impact on our industrial and educational futures. The need for us to work together and to understand the critical importance of decisions made in one area on other TAFE systems, is paramount.

I am sure that there will moves to divide us, for a variety of reasons, and the fundamental rationale for being part of a union will be challenged. I am sure that we are all concerned at the impact of AWAs on our memberships, and the possible divisive and competitive nature of such contracts. We know that no student will gain a better education as a result of an AWA being offered and accepted in TAFE. But we also know that AWAs and individual contracts offer governments the opportunities to downgrade working conditions in particular and to increase precarious appointments.

Over the next couple of days at this AGM, it is important for delegates to share information with each other and to consider the most effective and strategic ways to ensure unity within the TAFE sector. There will be issues around coverage, and the standing of TAFE divisions that require further consideration both at this AGM, and over the coming months.

The educational landscape has changed for us. If we have learned from the New Zealand experience, we will know that it is unlikely to ever be the same again. Year after year we have talked about the need for strategic partnerships with a variety of industry and community groups, and particularly with our students. We know this isn't easy, but we also know that we can do this if we consider the Wollongong experience that Rob Long will talk about in one of the workshops, and if we analyse and replicate more intensely the successful partnerships and campaigning that we have undertaken over the last few years in defence of public vocational education and training.

This AGM has a number of interesting and significant speakers who will present views and ideas to us that will assist us in our deliberations. We will spend time discussing the TAFE Futures inquiry and how we can effectively regain control of the vocational education and training agenda, and position ourselves as the knowledgeable and expert spokespersons in our sector. We haven't attempted at this AGM to recreate a lot more policy in TAFE, AMES or Corrective Services. We need rather to consider the actions that we can take in our campaigning to stop the destruction of TAFE by the Howard Government.

Knowing that we have to fight not just for TAFE and public education, but also for our workplace rights as unionists, is daunting. We each need to be able to walk away from this AGM on Friday believing that we can win the fight and knowing how we can do this.

As President, I look forward to a strong and lively debate on these issues, so that we can thoroughly consider what we need to do and how we need to do it. It is not the time for half hearted decisions and poorly arrived at directions. It is the time to be determined that we can wage an innovative and exciting campaign that will challenge the Federal Government, and the state and territory governments if need be, at every turn. Public vocational education and training will survive the Howard Government, but it is our responsibility to ensure it is a public system that we want, and that will provide the quality education for the future of our students and for Australia. The Howard Government can't be allowed to destroy that or the Union movement of which we are a part and of which we are so proud.