

Federal TAFE President's Speech to 2008 National TAFE Council AGM

Colleagues

What we need to remember of most importance this year is that we succeeded. Last year we set a goal of defeating the Howard Government, and we did. It would have been great to be able to bottle the euphoria of 25 November to experience it again and again. But it's important to know that the union movement can take on a government and can bring it to its knees. Despite all the other reasons for Howard's defeat, there is no doubt that the Your Rights @ Work campaign made a significant difference, and that the intensive campaigning by unionists in some of the marginal seats helped to ensure that swing. Unfortunately for us, TAFE did not feature as significantly as we thought it might, and the announcements from the Labor Opposition were pretty woeful.

One of our greatest challenges now is to try and persuade the Rudd Government that public education is of prime importance. As we've seen even recently in comments from Julia Gillard in relation to private school funding, this will not be easy. The whole push of the ALP policy "Skilling Australia for the Future" was around competitive tendering for the funding of 450,000 new VET places over the next four years. This program will operate outside the current funding agreement with states and territories, and there is no additional funding for TAFE per se. Unfortunately the ALP appears to have bought into the criticism that has been waged against TAFE by the Howard Government and some employer groups. The policy makes statements such as: "The new places will be delivered in a comprehensively reformed system which meets the concerns of industry groups such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) who have called for a more responsive training system."

In the very small part of the policy devoted to Training Providers, it says: 'As the single largest provider of training in Australia, TAFE remains an important part of Australia's training system. The TAFE system will continue to receive funding for existing places, and it is expected that, as a major training provider, TAFE will receive a significant proportion of additional funding through these new training places. At the same time, competition for industry-held places will drive TAFE to become more entrepreneurial in identifying and responding proactively to future training demands in workplaces. Labor will not pursue ideologically-driven changes to the public, private or corporate status of institutes such as TAFE. Instead it will focus on increasing responsiveness and flexibility of the current training system, which should in turn drive governance reform across institutional providers.'

As in so much that seems to get written about TAFE, we need to try and 'break the code'. Does entrepreneurial stand for funding that comes through industry and commercial work rather than governments? Our collective experiences would indicate that this is the case. Does it also suggest operating outside current Awards and Agreements? It appears to. The Government's policy says that it will not pursue the ideologically-driven changes that we experienced in the Skilling Australia's Workforce Act, but instead will focus on increasing responsiveness and flexibility of the current system. It begs the question as to how the Government intends to do just that.

What is again perplexing in this policy is that the ALP apparently recognises the faults of the Howard Government in not supporting TAFE adequately, but yet fails to address that issue itself. This policy falls far short of the rhetoric of Shadow Minister Stephen Smith, when he told us that one of the first things that he would do is provide more funding for TAFE.

We need to keep these words and possible meanings in mind as we determine our campaign and strategies to use with the Rudd Government. Through our lobbying over the years and in the lead-up to the elections we have gained many friends and supporters in the new Government. Our challenge now is how do we persuade these supporters to make TAFE the issue it should be, and to recognise the important role of the AEU in VET policy development and implementation.

It is also with some dismay therefore that we noted that one of Julia Gillard's first duties as Education Minister was to attend the AiG Conference, and that in her address she indicated how

appropriate her attendance was. We believe that it would also be appropriate for the Minister to engage with the AEU and to discuss policy issues with us, as a matter of utmost importance.

One of our challenges continues to be how we have an effective voice in the VET sector. How do we ensure that we represent the public VET sector, rather than TAFE Directors Australia? Our partnerships will be important in achieving this, and we are currently working with other unions and employer associations to be able to take joint positions to the Rudd Government. These partnerships will be even more important given the Government's intention to extend and strengthen the Industry Skills Councils to play important roles in funding determinations. We do not currently have a voice in these Councils, and we need to consider how we achieve this as well as representation on the 'expert' Board, Skills Australia.

We have tried to liaise with TAFE Directors Australia on areas of common concern and interest, including in the lead-up to the elections, but this has not worked. It appears our agendas are too different. It seems that TDA's primary concern is not public education, but rather more power and influence to the TAFE Directors. After all you only have to consider what have been the results of their lobbying and influencing. Certainly nothing that has increased funding for TAFE or improved quality education. Rather, they have reinforced the agenda we are currently experiencing in states and territories of de-educationalising TAFE, creating autonomous Institutes, and attacking our wages and conditions. It is for all these reasons outlined that we thought the most effective focus for this AGM should be about education versus narrow training.

Peter Kell's report from the National TAFE Inquiry was quite adamant about the need for TAFE to continue to maintain its role in providing a broad range of educational opportunities for its wide group of students. The report emphasised the importance of what TAFE does in further and second chance education. How do we reconcile Peter Kell's findings with a plan by the new Federal Government to create a system that responds more to the needs of industry and the economy? Where does the policy speak of communities and equity groups, and even though it states that the current Commonwealth-State Agreements will not be disturbed; as we know, these agreements very much drive funding towards skills shortage areas and again ignore all the other areas of education and training that TAFE is so revered for.

These issues, and how they affect our profession as teachers, are those that you will need to consider over the next few days. It would appear at this stage, that the Federal Labor Government will probably support the current changes taking place in states and territories around governance and delivery in TAFE. There is nothing in their policies or words that suggest otherwise, and in fact the opposite. Therefore our unity and support for each other is important. We believe in TAFE, in all its forms, and we believe passionately in TAFE teachers and students. We apparently, are the only group that does.

From this meeting we will need to develop a campaign that we can take to the new Government, and that will effectively build a movement both within and outside governments that supports and invests in public vocational education and training, ie TAFE. And also from this meeting we need to consider the changes that are currently taking place in all our systems, and decide what it is we want and what it is we must oppose. And then we need to decide how we can effectively work together to make this happen.

Linda Simon
Federal TAFE President
13 January 2008