



**PRIME MINISTER**



LIBERAL PARTY DINNER

BENDIGO, VIC.

1 MAY 1972

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon.  
William McMahon, CH, MP

Mr Mayor and Mrs Elliott, Ladies and Gentlemen :

I am delighted to be back in Bendigo for one vitally important reason. I am here to help and to make absolutely certain that John Bouchier will take his place as the next Member for Bendigo in the National Parliament.

I share your enthusiasm - and confidence - that when the numbers go up he is going to be sitting in Canberra with me on the Government benches. You can count on that.

To achieve this, we are going to need your help; we are going to need your energies; we are going to need your donations. But most of all, we are going to need what I call the influence of key Liberals in this community and in every electorate throughout this nation -- those men and women in every community, large or small, whose opinions are worth having, and whose judgments are respected and sought by others.

They are people like you. People who understand the fundamental qualities of the Australian way of life. They understand, just as we in the Parliamentary Liberal Party understand, that today we are at a crossroads of our national life.

For many years, the Liberal and Country Party coalition has governed this country steadily and effectively. It has served the people well. Today there are elements in our community who want not just change, not just an alternative, but a complete upheaval of our whole pattern of living.

Until recently, it looked as though this viewpoint may have been gaining unthinking adherents. But now there are signs that these elements are beginning to take a harder look at the changes that might confront them under the regime of the Labor Party.

There are signs that many Australians are going to think much more carefully before they throw away a whole and wholesome way of life - and before they vote to downgrade individual freedom, and replace the rewards of individual initiative with a stereotyped society.

It is up to us as Liberals to get out into the community in the coming months and make our opinions felt. We have had the support of the majority in this State for many years. The basic reasons for that support are simple and clear.

There was the appeal of our own policies and people in creating the climate for the unprecedented growth and development of this nation, and there was the disunity of the Labor Party, especially in Victoria.

Mr Chairman, we all know that very little has changed. There are plenty of brave words and idle visions put before you -- but nothing has come of them. Remember the great reforms that were going to take place in the Victorian Labor Party. All Australians now know what a sham they were. That was shown the other day in the cynical and coldblooded support of the North Vietnamese invasion. Need I say more? In Victoria, our opponents condemn themselves.

I think it is also appropriate, here in Bendigo, to say something about our education policy and achievements. In that context, I question the attitude of the Victorian Labor Party to education policy - an attitude that was expressed so stridently in recent weeks by the Labor Member for Bendigo. That is, until the Leader of the Opposition had a talk to him. This was an episode which I believe could justifiably be called a story of pride and prejudice.

We in the Government are proud of the record of the Commonwealth in education over the last ten years. Particularly, we are proud of our unshakeable commitment to freedom of choice, of schools for individuals and groups within the community. I will give you an outline of what we have done in education, and of our guidelines for the future, in a moment. But before that, I want to turn to the other side of the story.....

I am not sure whether or not the Member for Bendigo regards himself as the Opposition's spokesman on education matters. They have three or four people who seem to claim the title. But at any rate, the Member for Bendigo is the one who goes along with the Victorian Labor Party in its opposition to the principle of aid to independent schools. This was shown by his recent most intemperate and prejudiced statements on the subject of aid to independent schools and the Government's actions in accordance with that policy.

I will give you a sample to indicate the feeling of the honourable member on the subject. These are quotations from his newspaper interviews:

He says the Government has "become crazed with the madness of a mindless State aid system." That we were : "Drunk with the mania of State aid", and that a grant we made to a school in Canberra was, and I quote, "The last word in the insanity of Liberal State aid". Here ends the quote.

I think people can be left to make their own judgments about anyone who makes such absurd exaggerations as a substitute for genuine political debate. Australians in general and Victorians in particular have never had much time for extremism and bigotry, the more particularly in this time on questions of education policy. That has been shown by the results of elections here for many years. These recent events give me confidence that Victorians will continue to reject unrepresentative and extreme views - as well as the men who enunciate them.

But before I leave the honourable member for Bendigo to his melancholy future, I want to complete the story of his assault on the policy of Commonwealth aid to independent schools as it operates in Canberra.

My own Minister for Education, Malcolm Fraser, gave a very good answer in Parliament to his extreme allegations. A few days later, a leading churchman described the honourable member's approach as misleading and distasteful. He wanted to know whether the Leader of the Opposition agreed with those statements. We have not heard a peep out of the Labor Party since.

The honourable member did, of course, receive a severe caucus rebuke from a very senior Labor man and is also reputed to have been carpeted by his leader. In public, the question has been hushed up.

I invite you to contrast that sorry story with the record of Commonwealth involvement in education, which I believe we can justifiably point to with pride. Later this week, we will be releasing a booklet which sets out with great clarity the objectives of the Liberal Party's education policy and the record of the Government's achievements. I recommend it to you strongly. It will set straight these recent attempts to mislead the public about what the Commonwealth is doing in education.

There is one central fact that is very hard for anyone to ignore. It is this. The Liberal Country Party Government was the first and only Federal Government to act on aid to independent schools and to give extensive direct Commonwealth assistance to all schools.

We began with a policy of aid to independent schools in the Australian Capital Territory many years ago. Successive Liberal and Country Party Governments have carried on and expanded the Commonwealth's involvement. We are the only major political Party that has wholeheartedly accepted the challenge of the plural society to help educate children outside the State system.

At the same time, it is grossly wrong to imply that we do not have a significant and great concern for Government schools. This is shown by the fact that our opponents have very little on which to hang an education campaign.

Of all the capital assistance going directly to schools from the Commonwealth, 83.5 per cent goes to the State schools which educate 78 per cent of the schoolchildren. On that basis, our support is weighted in favour of the Government schools.

Our teacher training assistance is helping to produce new teachers at a much faster rate than the growth of new enrolments. In the past ten years, the Commonwealth's direct spending on education has gone up more than six times, from \$55 million to \$357 million.

Equally indicative of our growing interest are the increasing numbers of new areas of education support which we have moved into. I mention, particularly, programmes which are helping migrant children with language problems. And the aboriginal study grants schemes which are training some thousands of aborigines. Then, of course, there have been our science facilities and our libraries programmes.

In providing this support, we do not arbitrarily decide that one school shall receive some assistance and another shall not. We have publicly stated the standards which are to apply. And as we have said, many many times, if a school exceeds these standards, it will not get a cent out of the Commonwealth.

But we do not make these decisions ourselves. In the case of independent schools, we have Advisory Committees from outside the Government. And in the case of Government schools, the States themselves decide their own priorities. So they should.

That is the system we operate for capital grants. It is lump sums for the establishment of new facilities. In the case of our help with day to day running costs, we apply a policy of across-the-board payments without any means test. And this is where we find the fundamental and vital difference between Labor and Liberal policies.

They want the power to say which school shall grow and which shall wither, whether it be a Government or a non-Government school. This is the essence of Labor's Schools Commission Plan. They want the power to reach into any one or all of Australia's 10,000 schools and determine each school's policies - by giving or withholding finance. They even want the power to act from Canberra in the movement of teachers from one school to another.

Turn now to our own policies. From the beginning of 1970, we provided per capita grants to independent schools at the rate of \$35 per primary pupil and \$50 per secondary pupil. If we had not done this, significant numbers of independent schools would have closed down. And the State system would have been compelled to take over the extra burdens.

From the beginning of this year, we increased these grants to \$50 per primary pupil and \$58 per secondary pupil. But the Labor Party moved a motion in the Senate which, if successful, would have stopped those increases.

It was a clear indication how some substantial elements of the Labor Party interpret their policy. It is a policy which is supported by the Member for Bendigo, by the Victorian Labor Party, and by very significant sections of the Labor Party in Canberra. It is a policy which will deny diversity and end experimentation. It will inevitably lead to a centralised monolithic system of enforced uniformity and conformity.

We repudiate it utterly. Labor's policies, based on the South Australian model, would put a penalty on dedicated parents. The harder they work for their child's school, the less money that school will get from a Labor Government. They would have a means test on education, but no means test on pensions.

This is completely unacceptable. We will provide the maximum Commonwealth support for both Government and non-Government schools with the minimum of Commonwealth control.

Parents who send their children to non-Government schools are saving the taxpayer hundreds of millions of dollars. At the same time, they are exercising their right to freedom of choice to which we as Liberals are dedicated.

We will fight to maintain that freedom of choice.

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