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EMBARGO 5.00PM SUNDAY 18 MARCH 1973:



PRIME MINISTER

THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN EDUCATION

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER

THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,

AT THE OPENING OF THE M.B. FLOOD SCIENCE BLOCK OF

ST. PATRICK'S COLLEGE, PROSPECT VALE, TASMANIA

SUNDAY 18 MARCH 1973

There has never been any qualification about my Government's commitment to education. In my policy speech last November I promised that education would be the most rapidly growing sector of public spending under a Labor Government. We see it as the primary instrument for improving the quality of life of our people and promoting equality of opportunity for our children.

Under previous Governments, education was one of the most neglected fields. It was an area for which Liberal Governments in the national Parliament accepted little or no responsibility. Whatever responsibility they accepted was grudging, tardy and partial. Our responsibility will be wholehearted, prompt and far-reaching. We are determined that education will no longer be used as a weapon to perpetuate privilege, inequality and division. We are determined that every child who embarks on his secondary education this year shall have the same opportunity as any other child of completing that education and advancing further.

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Our approach to education has never been based on elitist, regional, sectarian or other discriminatory grounds. Our concern is for all children in all schools, whether Government, Catholic or otherwise independent. The debate in education is no longer whether schools should receive assistance from the National Government. That principle is now accepted. It was established in 1964 when the Liberal Government introduced its program of Commonwealth assistance for science blocks, under which this building was financed. It was fully accepted by our opponents in May last year when they announced some long-term but inadequate proposals for assistance to secondary schools. So the question of whether the National Government has a responsibility is no longer an issue. The debate now is about the scale and method of the national Government's involvement - whether it should be piecemeal or thorough, selective or universal, arbitrary or planned, haphazard or co-ordinated. Our preference is clear: It is for universality, for planning, for co-ordination, and for generosity. Our aim is to ensure that all schools receive assistance according to their needs.

There can be nothing but praise for the efforts of the poorer non-government schools, particularly those in the Catholic system, to provide their children with educational services of the highest standard. This is no easy task. Within the Catholic system, this college, of course, is one of the fortunate schools. The Christian Brothers have set a noted example of dedication and self-sacrifice in the cause of education. I pay my own tribute to the Rev. Brother Michael Flood, who gave 65 years of service to his Church as a Christian Brother, whose memory is esteemed in Catholic education circles throughout this country, and whose name is commemorated by the building we open today.

The educational system he served was founded on the principle that parents have a right to choose their children's education. But it is not enough to insist that parents have a right to choose. So they should and do. But the choice for all parents should be one between systems and philosophies of education, not between standards and opportunities. Too often under previous Governments the only choice was that given to a wealthy or privileged minority to choose a wealthier or more privileged school. We can never be content with over-crowded, under-staffed impoverished schools merely because a minority have a right to opt out of them.

It is the Government's duty - it is my Government's determination - to see that the right of choice carries with it neither hardship for parents nor deprivation for children. After all, the parents of Catholic children have suffered as much as anyone from the old approach. The pupils of State and Catholic schools - I do not in this context include St. Patrick's College - have had less than half as good a chance as the pupils of other independent schools to gain Commonwealth secondary scholarships, and much less than half as good a chance of completing their secondary education.

Throughout Australia only 4% of the pupils at Government schools and 7% at Catholic schools qualify for secondary scholarships. But 15% of the pupils at other independent schools qualify for them. Only three out of every 10 pupils at Government and Catholic schools reach the final year of secondary education, whereas at other non-government schools eight of every 10 reach the final year. No democratic government can accept this disparity. It is morally unjust, it is socially wasteful. To sell our children short today is to sell Australia short tomorrow.

My Government has already begun to tackle the problems of inequality in education. We will adopt the same method to assist schools as previous Governments adopted to assist universities and colleges of advanced education. In December I wrote to a number of leading educationalists, including representatives of the Catholic system, inviting them to join an interim committee for a Schools Commission, under the chairmanship of Professor Karmel, which would examine and determine the needs of students in all schools. In due course a permanent Australian Schools Commission will be set up. Its reports will be published; its advice will form the basis for my Government's assistance to education.

We will act quickly upon the recommendations of the interim committee. In answer to a question in Parliament last Tuesday, I had this to say about the progress of the interim committee's work:

"I have kept regularly in touch with my colleague the Minister for Education in regard to the deliberations of the interim committee. I have met the Chairman, Professor Karmel, on several occasions since it was appointed. It is expected that the interim committee's report will be made available as requested before the end of May. This will mean that it will be available in sufficient time to be considered at the Premiers Conference which should be held in June or maybe, if the House gets up early enough, even in May. In those circumstances the State Governments and the non-government school authorities will have ample opportunity to prepare for the 1974 scholastic year in the light of the additional funds which it is expected the Australian Government will make available for schools."

There is nothing unusual or even particularly radical in a system based on priority of needs. It is in fact rather simple and obvious. No company or enterprise in the world would allocate its resources in any other way. The Catholic education system itself determines its priorities according to what it conceives to be the needs of its children. Our aim is to avoid the old-fashioned system of ad hoc decisions for special grants which took no account of the long-term needs and planning requirements of the beneficiaries of those grants. Everywhere in the old system of grants one finds a pattern of disparity. If we look at the breakdown of grants for science facilities approved in 1971 for the four years to June 1975 we find that some States emphasise the needs of Government schools over non-government schools, others give preference to non-government over government schools. South Australia is giving four times as much money under the science grants to government schools as to non-government schools - \$2,647,125 against \$663,525. Queensland is giving more money to non-government schools - \$3,323,020 - than to government schools, who are to receive only \$3,072,780. The science block program, the grants for libraries, and system of per capita grants approved by previous governments were far from adequate responses to the real needs of our children.

They were not the solutions of a Government accepting its responsibilities: they were in fact devices for avoiding them.

My Government has undertaken to continue in the current year all grants to schools made under existing Commonwealth legislation. I want to tell you now of the Government's attitude to arrangements already entered into with non-government schools for science facilities and library programs.

The previous Government offered specific amounts for individual science facility projects for each year of the present program to its conclusion on 30 June 1975. These are firm commitments and will be honoured by my Government. But the continuation of specific grants for science laboratories in both government and non-government schools after June 1975 will be a matter for the Schools Commission or, in the short term, the interim committee.

A similar approach will be followed for the secondary schools libraries program. Specific offers have been made by the previous Government for individual projects up to 31 December 1974 when the present authority will expire. My Government believes that these offers represent commitments under the existing legislation and they will be honoured. But after 1974 we will look to the Schools Commission to make recommendations on whatever library grants are appropriate.

We take the same view with general capital grants for schools. On 12 December 1972 I assured the Premiers that the \$167 million appropriated under the State Grants Schools Act 1972 for capital facilities in government schools would be made available and that they could proceed with their programs. I have given the Premiers a similar assurance that the \$48 million appropriated for non-government schools will also be available. But my Government agrees with Professor Karmel, the Chairman of the interim committee, that from July 1974 the allocation of money remaining for the benefit of non-government schools should be on the recommendation of the Schools Commission or the Interim Committee.

We have also decided that Commonwealth per capita grants to non-government schools for recurrent expenditure for 1973 will be paid at the rates already approved for 1973 - that is, \$62 per primary pupil and \$104 per secondary pupil. In December I wrote to Archbishop Carroll and to the National Council of Independent Schools and told them of that decision. After 1973 the interim committee will make recommendations for recurrent grants for 1974/75 on the basis of needs and priorities. In subsequent years such recommendations will be made by the Statutory Schools Commission.

With these arrangements, we intend within the lifetime of this Parliament, or sooner, to ensure that the national Government's commitment to education is discharged wholly on the basis of needs. I do not apologise for the fact that the Government's emphasis is on meeting needs where they demonstrably exist and on giving priority to areas where the need is greatest. We are concerned with inequalities; we are not concerned with the historical sources of these inequalities. It is the child who matters. For this reason we have announced programs of assistance for isolated children and students at tertiary education institutions who are in genuine need. For this reason we have shown our concern for the education of Aboriginal children. For the same reason again, we have taken steps to increase the number of dental therapists and social workers in training.

Again with our belief in equality of opportunity, we have tackled the question of pre-school education. Our approach is a simple one. We believe that pre-school education with its many advantages should be considered a normal part of the educational ladder, not an abnormal provision for a percentage of our pre-school population. We want for every Australian child the opportunity of a year of pre-school training. Thus we aim to make available to Australians a basic educational service which has hitherto and with great success been available to all children only in the Australian Capital Territory.

In this way my Government is doing more to help secondary education than any previous government has done, or any agency has recommended. In 1970 a nationwide survey of the educational needs of government schools was conducted by the Australian Education Council, consisting of State Ministers for Education. It was at that time the only comprehensive attempt to assess educational needs. My Government welcomed it for that reason. It drew public attention to alarming deficiencies. But there were weaknesses in that survey, and some of its techniques were subject to criticism.

It took no account of technical or pre-school education. The investigation by the Interim Schools Committee, set up by my Government, will be both more up-to-date and more comprehensive. Since the 1970 survey was made, costs have increased and the problems are more urgent. Many areas of need were not considered at all by the 1970 survey. By means of our proposed Technical Education Commission and the Interim Pre-schools Committee already set up, we will be examining fields which the needs survey did not even touch. It did not consider the specific needs of isolated, Aboriginal or handicapped children. Our program does. It will go beyond anything attempted before.

In all its action, the new national Government has shown its concern for all children irrespective of where they live, whether they are in a state or an independent school, or whether they are suffering from disadvantage. In this we differ from our opponents. A good education, the best education, is not something individuals must be forced to buy. It is something the whole community must undertake to provide. It is not the privilege of a few children but the right of all. My Government will ensure that such a right is permanently enshrined in Australian society.
