

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR E.G. WHITLAM, QC, MP, FOR THE OPENING OF THE ANNUAL ART EXHIBITION AT ST PATRICK'S COLLEGE, STRATHFIELD, N.S.W., FRIDAY, 26 APRIL 1974

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I was assured when I accepted your invitation to open this exhibition that I could make my speech "as political as you like". Since we are about to start an election campaign I am happy to accept your assurance and take you at your word. The question is: should I make a political speech about art or a political speech about education? Like St. Patrick's College, we have an excellent record in both. We have almost doubled Australian Government assistance to the arts and we have almost doubled Australian Government assistance to education. Some of the schools we have assisted are famous schools; some of the paintings we have bought are famous paintings. At least one of them is very famous. A year ago everyone had heard of St. Patrick's College but not everyone had heard of Jackson Pollock. Perhaps there are more votes in education.

So let me make a "political speech". Let me make this statement without qualification: Education is the greatest single achievement of the Labor Government. The prospects for education, the prospects for our children, have been utterly transformed. Look back to the situation before we came to office. There were vast deficiencies in the States' education budgets; inequalities between pupils, inequalities between schools, inequalities between States and regions, were deeply and hopelessly entrenched. Working-class parents were taxed so that money could be poured into wealthy schools that needed assistance least. The Australian Government was giving nothing - not one cent - to the recurrent costs of government schools. Whole areas of education were neglected. Primary schools were downgraded in favour of secondary schools. Needy secondary schools were downgraded in favour of prosperous secondary schools. University fees were restricting tertiary education to those who could afford it, Teachers' colleges were ignored. Pre-schooling as a right of every Australian child was practically unheard of. Technical education was the Cinderella of the system.

On top of that - on top of that gross pattern of neglect and impoverishment - education was bedevilled by a futile controversy over "State aid". The Liberals' twin shibboleths of State aid and State rights embittered and delayed every rational attempt to give a new deal to Australian children. We have given that new deal. In 17 months we have scrapped the accumulated deadwood of ad-hoc grants, patch-up subsidies and makeshift aid programs initiated by our predecessors. We have given a new charter to the children of Australia. The old obsession with State aid has been buried for good. And remember this: State aid was as much an obsession of the right as it was of the left, as much a preoccupation of government school supporters as non-government school supporters. Where are the DOGS now? I have not heard a word from them in this election. The DOGS have had their day! The prejudice and negativism they promoted and represented - the bitterness they shared with their opponents at the opposite extreme - have disappeared. We have lifted the whole debate on education out of a miasma of irrelevance and sectarianism. The beneficiaries are the children of Australia and the generations of children to come.

What must strike any impartial observer of this debate is the cynical opportunism of the Liberals. For years they decried any attempt to improve the condition of our schools as an interference with the rights of States. How often they told us that education was a "State responsibility". When our programs for increased grants to schools - the Karmel funds - came before Parliament last December, the Liberals voted against them. They opposed the legislation. They opposed the whole concept of needs by insisting that we make extra funds available to A-category schools that needed the money least. Because of their doctrinaire attachment to the wealthiest schools they threatened to block our entire program of reform, to prevent promised funds going to the States - even Liberal States - for their education programs, and to hold up the Australian Schools Commission unless we agreed to stack it with their friends and supporters. The Country Party - and I give credit for this - saw the folly of the Liberals' ways. They voted for our measures while the Liberals opposed them. I am not sure whether these events were more important as a commentary on the Liberal attitude to our children's future or as a commentary on Opposition unity.

I ask you to look at the attitudes of the Liberals now and contrast it with what they were saying only five short months ago. Five months ago they voted against our proposals. Today they say they would match them! Now that an election is coming on, the Liberals have discovered the value of our reforms. They promise to keep the Australian Schools Commission if returned to power. They promise to make the same funds available to schools. Of course, they also promise to cut back - or reduce the growth - of Government spending. The people will have to decide which promise they believe. I simply ask whether anyone can believe a party or trust a party that within the space of five months can change its mind completely on an issue of such radical importance as the education of our children.

So here is the Liberal record on education; 23 years of neglect, one year of obstruction, six months of silence, and two weeks of contrition. For a generation they did nothing for the schooling of the majority of Australian children. Their indifference and contempt blighted the education of thousands of Australians. They condemned Australian children to overcrowded classes, ill-equipped and understaffed schools. They neglected the needs of disadvantaged schools and isolated children. They neglected the needs of teachers' colleges. Every other area of tertiary education received some support - often tardy and grudging support - but teachers' colleges got nothing. They particularly neglected the needs of the Catholic sector in both primary and secondary education. Their aid to Catholic schools failed to recognise the areas of greatest need and acknowledge the genuine difficulties of the Catholic system.

All that has been changed by our legislation. As a result of our legislation Catholic schools, both primary and secondary, whether systemic or not, receive recurrent assistance in direct relation to their needs.

Our program of funding schools according to their needs replaces the old system of across the board per capita grants. The introduction of the new program means that Catholic schools throughout Australia will receive a total of \$123 million for the years 1974 and 1975 instead of the estimated \$76.4 million which would have been available had the old per capita grants been maintained at the rate which applied in 1973. New South Wales Catholic schools will receive \$47 million under this arrangement. These schools would have received approximately \$29 million under the per capita scheme operated by the previous Government. It has been particularly unfair that some Catholic school principals have criticised the Labor Government, which has increased its grants for secondary schools, while making no criticism of the N.S.W. Liberal Government whose grants for secondary schools are much lower than those of the State Governments of Queensland and Victoria.

In the case of non-systemic non-government schools like St Patrick's College, the Karmel Committee made individual estimates of the needs of each school, classifying them into eight categories, ranking from H to A, in ascending order according to the level of recurrent resources available to pupils at these schools. St Patrick's was classified as Category G, indicating that the school should receive recurrent grants at the rate of \$85 per primary pupil and \$130 per secondary pupil in 1974 and \$120 per primary pupil and \$190 per secondary pupil in 1975. As a result of these grants it is estimated that your school will receive approximately \$140,000 in 1974 and \$203,000 in 1975 - a total of \$343,000 for the two years. Had the previous government's policy continued, and had the rate of per capita grants remained unchanged, the school would have received an estimated \$220,000 for the two years. In effect, the operation of the present scheme has resulted in an increase of 56% in recurrent funds available from the Australian Government to St. Patrick's College.

Let me say a word about the treatment of disadvantaged schools. We have recognised that certain schools are so deprived and needy that they are entitled to assistance of a special kind, apart from the normal criteria of need applied to other schools. Catholic disadvantaged schools throughout Australia will receive an additional \$2.45 million during the 1974/75 biennium. Of this, \$890,000 will be provided for Catholic schools in New South Wales. In addition, the Australian Government will make available \$3.76 million to disadvantaged schools to undertake building projects in 1974 and 1975. Of this amount \$1.3 million will be allocated to New South Wales. This program was introduced by the present Government. There was no comparable program of assistance to disadvantaged schools under the previous Government.

Finally, a word about Catholic and other non-government teachers' colleges. Because of the neglect of these colleges in the past, the Commission on Advanced Education has conducted an inquiry into their needs and recommended support for them. The recommendations are designed to give assistance by way of recurrent funds for 1974 and 1975. They are in two parts. Firstly, there is a basic provision for each college which will enable it to meet in reasonable measure the planned growth for 1974 and 1975, on the assumption that the proportion of religious in the total staff remains as indicated in the college submissions. Secondly, the Commission has recommended an additional sum, over and above that allowed for in the basic provision, to finance the replacement of religious by lay staff where necessary. In New South Wales, the Commission has recommended support for the Catholic College of Education on condition that by the end of 1975 it has its completed plans for amalgamation with the Good Samaritan Teachers College and a new institution is set up on a suitable site. The Commission has also recommended support for other teaching institutions, including the Catholic Teachers College at Worth Sydney, the Guild Teachers' College and the Good Samaritan Teachers College at Glebe Point.

Two weeks ago I wrote to Archbishop Carroll in these terms:

"As part of its education policy, I indicated that my Government would support teachers' colleges in the same way as all other tertiary institutions.

"The necessary measures have already been taken to include government teachers' colleges fully under advanced education arrangements, and in response to the request made to it last year the Commission on Advanced Education has recently submitted a report on financial provision for approved "private" teachers' colleges. The Government is in the process of dealing with this report which recommends that approved private teachers' colleges should receive assistance with recurrent costs from 1 January 1974.

"I am writing to assure you that support will be provided as soon as the normal parliamentary processes allow. The conditions of support will be along the lines discussed with the colleges by the Commission during its investigations and will be directed towards the rational development of the institutions within the overall tertiary program."

I commend the great contribution of the Catholic system to the education of Australia's children. For the first time, under this Government, their true needs and just entitlements have been recognised. As a result of our policies, Catholic education can look forward to a secure and prosperous future within a secure and prosperous educational system. The Christian Brothers have done much to raise the standards of teaching in our schools and set a proud example of selfless dedication to the interests of our children. This fine school, with its fine traditions, exemplifies the best in Catholic education. Your annual art exhibition is evidence of a lively concern for the cultural, intellectual and spiritual health of your pupils and the community you serve. I wish your exhibition every success. I have great pleasure in declaring it open.

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