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PRIME MINISTERFOR MEDIAMONDAY, 5 MAY, 1980ADDRESS TO SECOND NATIONAL CATHOLIC
EDUCATION CONFERENCE, A.N.U.

I am pleased indeed to be invited to open this conference, particularly as I recall your last national gathering of this kind in 1972, when I was then Minister for Education and Science.

That first conference took place against what was a fairly difficult background. For three quarters of a century freedom in education and the rights of church schools, and those who attended them, had been largely ignored. As a result, the commitment of Australian families to an education based on their religious faith provoked bitterness, sacrifice, and a very great deal of hard work.

I well recall the education environment at the beginning of the 1970s. It was a time, or had been a time, through the 50s and 60s, of great economic expansion. Jobs were available for those who wanted them. Because of this economic environment, insufficient attention was paid to the educational explosion that was taking place at the same time. Retention rates in State, indeed in all secondary schools, had been rising rapidly through the 50s and 60s. Costs of education were also increasing and the Catholic system was becoming more reliant on lay teachers, providing an additional cost burden for the Catholic system.

Moreover, the economic climate enabled greater resources to go to Government schools, thereby increasing the physical and resource pressures that again, were being exerted on large sections of the independent system.

These pressures threatened the very future of many independent schools. It was a critical time for education, for independent schools and also for Government.

We faced a question of whether this country, rich in diversity, was also to be served by diversity in education. Whether a right existed for those with particular religious beliefs to establish their own schools, or whether all education was to be secular and to be run by the State.

As Minister then, I believed strongly that freedom, independence and choice in education were essential and the claims that Governments should greatly improve their assistance to private schools had to be answered.

I do not doubt that well-endowed schools would have survived, no matter what the circumstances. But they are only a small part of the independent system.

The parish schools placed increasing burdens upon Australian families to pay for an education based significantly on their commitment to a faith.

We should never lose sight I believe, in this country, of the great sacrifice made down through the years by those who believed, often against significant odds, in the value and in the very existence, of religious education.

Let us dismiss now the fallacy that religious education is synonymous with wealth; that an endorsement of the values of religious education is an endorsement of the advantages of wealth.

Many Australian families whose incomes are very low make great sacrifices, are prepared to pursue difficult courses, because of their faith and because of their religious beliefs.

Pleasingly, since that first conference, new and important developments have taken place within the Catholic education system; as Governments have abandoned their neglect of private schools and initiated an active programme to restore equality and opportunity in education.

From initial support for building programmes to the per capita grants, and now through increased support based on a right to education, Governments have demonstrated their recognition of commitment to a dual system of education in Australia. It is worth noting that all Governments and all political parties, as I understand it, share in that commitment.

My interest in and support for Catholic education is founded on its indispensable contribution, not only to education itself in Australia, but also to the moral values of Australian society. I am convinced that Government has an important role to play in reducing the inequalities in educational resources and opportunities for all children in all schools. To do otherwise would be to undermine educational fairness and justice. To allow that to happen would be harmful to the vitality and potential growth of the entire community.

Funds will continue to be made available from the Commonwealth Budget to meet the needs of both Government and of non-Government schools. We shall continue to co-operate with the States, to make sure that all Australian children receive an education of the highest possible quality.

The Commonwealth is now the major source of public funds for non-Government schools and currently provides about two-thirds of their total public expenditure. But our commitment goes beyond the provision of funds. It is our firm belief that the continued existence of the independent school system in several ways improves the quality of all Australian education.

In the first place, it diversifies the educational opportunities, especially for those who want spiritual values to be part of the educational process. This leads to a strengthening of a community's social and moral fabric.

Just as importantly, Government support of independent schools underscores its commitment to freedom of choice in education, and the right of parents to educate their children as they believe right and proper.

My colleague, the Minister for Education, Wal Fife, will I am sure be speaking in more detail about the nature of our involvement in and contribution to non-Government schools, including this most important component; the Catholic system.

In the meantime, I note that the theme of this conference deals with commitments for the 1980s. Clearly, the Catholic education system, combining application to scholarship with a full regard for the importance of morality and traditional values, already accepts a commitment which will be of increasing significance in the decades ahead.

The last two or three decades have seen far-reaching and sweeping change in the Australian educational system. In the first place, equality of opportunity rightly came to the forefront of educational objectives. This new emphasis on the importance of education was welcome. However, against this, methods of teaching did not always keep pace with the broadening of educational opportunity. Too many people for a while saw education as an end in itself, without due regard for its purpose, its content or its function. The extension of educational opportunities seemed to breed an acceptance of any sort of education, without consideration for what might be the best kind of education. This led to what some would call educational experimentation, in which needs of students were perhaps unwittingly sacrificed in a desire for change. Most teachers I am certain, approached the widening opportunities in education with dedication, with commitment, and with a very real concern. But at the same time, there was an increasing community anxiety that some new courses and untried methods were coming into operation against growing evidence that they did not advance the welfare of their students. At the same time as teaching methods were changing, the emphasis on effort, on authority, and on rules, all suffered erosion.

But the community also viewed with growing disapproval the fact that new theories about what education meant were being coupled with a dwindling regard for excellence in educational achievement.

We were living in buoyant economic times. This hid the fact that problems were being built into the education of many Australian school children. Because school leavers could, by and large, obtain work without too much difficulty, because employers were then less discriminating than they now are, the role of education in securing rewarding and satisfying work was not well understood. However, as employment became more difficult for school leavers, education was increasingly put under the microscope and in many instances it has been found wanting.

When this new perception of education is coupled with the favourable reduction in pupil-teacher ratios, the realisation that expenditure in primary and secondary education had risen phenomenally, community concern about the direction of education gathered momentum, and so well it might.

In the current financial year, Commonwealth and State Government expenditure on schools will approach \$4,000 million, of which our share approaches some \$800 million. Yet these figures do not include the substantial sums expended each year on tertiary education, most of which is borne by the Commonwealth Government. There is a further example of the massive escalation in expenditure; the cost of maintaining children at a Government primary school rose from nearly \$650 seven or eight years ago to nearly \$1,000 in 1977-78. I have no doubt it is noticeably higher at the present time.

The increase in real terms is about 50 per cent. At the secondary level, the cost rose from just over \$1,100 in 1972-73, to between \$1,500 and \$1,600 in 1977-78. An increase in real terms of nearly 40 per cent.

Against that background, survival and strength of independent schools I believe became all the more necessary in the perception of many people, because the additional resources going to Government schools had not been seen to be parallel with an increase and betterment in the quality of education that was in fact provided.

Parents responded to the diversity in choice of our dual education system, and many parents took increasing advantage, often again at significant sacrifice of the processes at work in private education and in church schools.

It is not often understood that the resources available to Government schools are on average far in excess of those available to the great bulk of private schools. In fact, the resource targets set by the Schools Commission have been so rapidly achieved by Government schools that they now average out very high on a scale established by the Schools Commission for measuring that function. If we look at independent schools, we find that 90 per cent of all primary school students and nearly 56 per cent of secondary students in the non-Government sector, often schools which are rated on their resources, as being near the bottom of the scale. Funds now provided by Government have only brought us therefore to the beginnings of the move to educational equality at least so far as the provision of resources goes.

There is a fair way to go before we achieve equality in educational resources for all Australian school children.

There are two ways of guaranteeing Government support in the drive towards equal opportunity for children in non-Government schools. I understand that this is one of the matters that will be discussed amongst you in the hours, or the days, ahead. One way of course, is to make per capita grants on the basis of children at schools, on the basis of a right to a share in Government funds in the educational process. The other is to provide for schools on the basis of need. I would suggest that if funds were provided only on the basis of need, something important in terms of equality of education is lost. Because it does not therefore accept a basic right for Governments to support the education of all children in all schools.

What we in fact do of course is based on both principles. Some part of support is based on a basis of right, on a per capita basis, but then additional funds are made available with schools with lesser resources and are in need of greater help.

While few people today would dispute the right of church schools to their share of public funds, or the validity of our objective to see that for the poorer schools that share should be increased, some old resentments unfortunately still remain to Commonwealth or the State Government funding, causing problems not only for Governments but also for the education system as a whole.

I mentioned over the weekend, in 1973 one group took the legitimate, but as I believe the extreme course of bringing the matter of Government aid to non-Government schools before the High Court. The very fact that the case arose has given concern in some quarters. The Government, like all litigants, is hopeful of winning. But if that does not prove to be so, we will still remain unshaken in our commitment to our policies. We believe them to be important for Australia, for Australian education, and for Australian youth. We know they are vital for the survival of independent schools generally.

I mentioned over the weekend that we would do what we could within the law to enable our policies to be pursued. I also mentioned that as a last resort, if necessary, we would seek a constitutional amendment to enable just and proper support to be given to religious and independent schools. I think we would all hope that we did not have to take that course. We would all hope that what is now done would be found to be proper and within the Constitution. If it were not so, the nature of any judgement would obviously have to be looked at very closely to see what was the best way of overcoming a problem. But if we were left with rules that denied the capacity of the Commonwealth to provide support to independent schools, we would immediately have a most serious and difficult crisis confronting all Australian education. There is no point in us not being prepared to see that, examine it, and see what would have to be done about it.

What I wanted to make quite plain was that if that unfortunate circumstance did arise, our commitment to support for independent schools would remain unshaken and determined.

Since all Governments, and as I believe all political parties, have a common view and a shared view, I would hope that the means of overcoming the problem could be achieved without arousing once again the difficulties and the bitterness that were caused by this particular debate in past years.

We enter the 1980s with increasing enrolments in the private school system, and especially in Catholic schools, indicating that what goes on in your schools is being perceived by the community as providing an adequate response to the demands of a modern industrial society and the new educational requirements.

The second community response to the educational problems of the last two decades is the demand for a return to emphasis in education on traditional skills, which in some schools had been put aside. Attention is being focussed on the capacity of schools to provide competence in literacy and numeracy, while developing at the same time attitudes that enable a student to enter the adult world with confidence, and pride in himself and his capacities.

These qualities are a necessary foundation for all careers, in all walks of life. But there is still a growing concern that what students do as part of the educational process ought to be assessed against fair and testing criteria. That necessarily involves measurement and examination of effort. That is not to say that measurement is more important than any other aspect of the learning process. But we need to get examinations into perspective in education, rather than pretend that they have no part in what goes on. Admittedly, some growth and development is easily measured. Other growth is harder to measure, maybe sometimes even impossible to measure. But to place all store in quick, visibly measured improvement can distort the learning task. The measurement of achievement is important because young people seek achievement from their educational experiences.

Nonetheless, there are critics of examinations who base their criticism on the fact that examinations create pressure. At certain levels, and for certain students, pressure in education applied too early in life can have negative effects. But one of the things that the education process needs to do is to teach people to perform through pressure and gradually expose them to stresses that would be placed on them when they leave school.

The whole learning process, of which exams are a necessary part as I believe, needs to be designed to enable people to respond and work well under difficult and challenging circumstances. It needs to test students so that their own levels of performance are understood by them, and their capacities are developed as well and as far as possible.

The Williams Report has drawn attention to many of the problems faced in the aftermath of the change of direction in education that took place over the last two to three decades. It found that a disturbingly high proportion of leavers had not achieved a standard of literacy and numeracy that would enable them to make a satisfactory transition from school to work. Evidence presented to the committee, for example, by the Institute of Personnel Management, expressed deep concern that after years of primary and secondary schooling, and vast expenditure on education, many school leavers were inadequately equipped with the essential skills of literacy, oral fluency, and numeracy. The Institute estimated that up to 15 per cent of school leavers were not able to read an employment advertisement, or complete a simple application form. Independent studies commissioned by the Committee found that 15 per cent of 14 year olds were deficient in number work and 50 per cent of 14 year olds could not write a satisfactory letter of application for employment. These are regrettable legacies of the past, requiring re-assessment of the aims, the objectives, and the methods of education.

In particular, they highlight the disturbing reality that many young people have passed through school almost totally unsuited to the demands of modern society and to the workforce of which they would want to be a part.

However, to those who speak about a lost generation, the problem needs to be placed very much in perspective. Of the 250,000 young Australian who left school last year, some 60,000 continued with education in tertiary institutions. A further 140,000 found employment with relatively little difficulty, 40,000 of these obtaining apprenticeships which would equip them with valuable vocational skills. A further 10,000 were unavailable for study or for employment. That is hardly the picture of a lost generation. But it is true that about 40,000 young people failed to obtain full-time employment in the way the community which they, their parents and schools would have wanted.

In August of 1979, the highest percentage rates of unemployment we know were amongst young school leavers in the 15 to 16 year old group. It is to these people that the system has failed and the Government's primary concern in its programme is for people like these who leave school each year with difficult employment prospects.

The Government's programmes are also directed at those students still at school who are likely to be at risk when it comes their time to leave.

Late last year the then Minister for Education announced a comprehensive policy on transition from school to work, which aims to upgrade skills, attitudes and employment prospects for young people. Our commitment is that in this year we have made available about \$25 million for this important programme, with a significant commitment over a five year period.

Our hope is that State Governments will join with us in this programme and themselves contribute to it. So far, we have had good co-operation from each of the States in starting this initiative. Nonetheless, in a sense these measures attack the problem only after it has developed. A good argument could be construed to say that if schools were all doing the job they need to do and ought to be doing, this new programme of transition from school to work would in fact not be necessary. In a sense, the very fact that these programmes are needed indicate the failure of the school system to a significant number of young Australians.

What in essence has happened is that many young Australians have paid the price of an insufficient balance between formal education and practical training. School courses should be wide enough to respond to people with different talents and different inclinations. One of the failures of past years has been that too many people, too many schools, have concentrated on the academic scene. They have had the view that those with academic talents were good, could progress, that those without were not given the different kind of attention and care and concern that they need just as much as those with an academic bent of mind.

In the days when people were saying that secondary schooling was all about academic training, they were forgetting that there are other students with other talents, with other inclinations, that may be just as useful, just as constructive, just as necessary and sometimes more necessary in Australian society, but which were not given the attention and concern in the school system. I think, again, these are a part of the group that the school systems have failed.

Our education system needs to be disciplined enough, diverse enough, and responsive enough to find for each student something that that student can do well, something which will give each student satisfaction, and through this satisfaction the confidence to face the adult world with a faith in his or her own ability. If schools do not achieve that for all their students, I look upon that not as a failure for the student, but as a failure for the school itself.

In meeting these requirements, the Catholic education system is an effective partner with the Commonwealth, not only in the direct education of many young Australians, but also through a series of special activities and special initiatives. For some years Catholic schools have participated in joint programmes of the Schools Commission which aimed to help those recognised as having particularly pressing education needs, such as those with specific physical and mental handicaps. It has also been pleasing to note the enthusiasm with which the Catholic school system have indicated their willingness to participate in 1980 in the Government school to work transition policy. These are encouraging signs.

Increasingly education is being seen, not just as a preparation for life, but as a large part of life itself. It must facilitate understanding of and adjustment to inescapable and sometimes accelerating and challenging changes.

The Government will continue to make its contribution, but the real challenge must always be one for people most intimately involved in the educational process: parents, teachers, staff and students. But above all, young people need to avail themselves of the opportunities that lie ahead of them. Many of these will derive from the prospects for the Australian economy over the whole of the 1980s. And of all the countries around the world, I know of no country with better prospects than this.

Over the last twelve months, to March of this year, 180,000 new jobs have been created in Australia. That is a better year than any for a very long while. That gives cause for encouragement in the future. Further, by June of 1980, over half a million Australians, many of them young Australians, will have been helped by the various training programmes that the Commonwealth has introduced to help give people the kind of jobs skills and experience which is necessary to gain satisfying and rewarding work.

Young people must be encouraged to work at these opportunities and to appreciate that by doing so, they face a future in which they can be truly free; free for work and for leisure, for being something and well as doing something.

It is the hope of us all in the 1980s that education will teach our youth a sense of worth and dignity of others, to feel their debt to others, to have commitments, commitments to causes and concerns they have thought about and made their own.

We want our young people, because they owe something to the world, to be prepared for a life of service to something beyond themselves.

I am sure this conference will provide a stimulating forum for discussion of the means whereby such education goals of the 80s can be sustained and realised. I congratulate you all on the contribution you have made to the educational development of Australia, and I welcome your commitment to the challenge of the decade ahead. I will have pleasure in seeing what conclusions you come to over the next two or three or four days. It is my very great pleasure indeed, to declare open this Second National Catholic Education Conference.