

PRIME MINISTER INTERVIEWED BY BARRY CASSIDY, ABC TV

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Prime Minister, how would it benefit 16 and 17 year olds to have the unemployment benefit denied to them?

Prime Minister

I think a lot of the publicity of the last few days has completely missed the point; missed the point that there is a real problem and what we try and do about it. The Schools Commission Report on the schooling for 15 and 16 year olds - and I have a copy of this Report here - indicates very plainly that many of our secondary schools are concentrating on academic training for that small proportion of young Australians who are going to go direct to a tertiary institution. They point out that is about 15 per cent of the kids at school. Now, this Schools Commission Report is saying in very plain terms that many of Australia's schools - and maybe all I think they say - of Australia's schools are failing a proportion of young Australians. Now, quite plainly, the 50,000 young Australians under 18 who are on the dole, they have left school early, they have not been able to get a job, must be heavily amongst those whom the Schools Commission says Australia's schools are failing. We want to establish the circumstances in which schools or training institutions will offer courses which suit the talents and capacities of these young Australians, so they will not feel school feeling disillusioned with school and they will not have to feel disillusioned with the whole society by having the only thing that society can offer them under present circumstances - and that is the dole. Now, none of this is a substitute for expanding the number of jobs for a growing economy. We are working at that and will continue to do so, but there are many young Australians at risk. They are the ones that the school system is failing. We want to try and establish with the States the kind of courses that will enable them to develop their own talents, their own aptitudes, in a constructive way. If you could establish the circumstance in which for every young Australian man and woman in the 16 and 17 year old age bracket, you can say "but there is a course available that would suit them, that will enable them to get a useful job after they have left school or after they have finished formal training at some sort of technical college". If there is a course available for them that will enable them to do that, and if that helps them to get a job afterwards, is that not much better than having them leave school at the age of 15 and just getting unemployment benefits? There is another question here also, because we recognise that people keeping people in full time education a bit longer might put hardship on some low income families. There is already a secondary allowance scheme that is designed to encourage or to help low income families with their children in the last two years of secondary schooling. I in fact was the Education Minister who introduced that allowance first, 10 or so years ago.

Prime Minister (continued)

But we are looking at the relevance of that and what else might need to be done if people are going to stay in full time education or training longer, and if that is going to involve increased hardship to low income families. We are looking at that as part of this overall question. Surely what we are seeking to do is much better for young Australian men and women than leaving school at the age of 15 and going on the dole.

Cassidy

These courses though, presumably can be provided without taking away the dole from some ...

Prime Minister

Yes, but if the courses are there, and if that leads to work, the unemployment benefit ceases to be necessary in its own right. But, that is way down the track. The debate has concentrated on the unemployment benefit issue when really the debate should have concentrated on; why do these people leave school early, why do they find it difficult to get a job above all, and what ought society and Governments do about it.

Cassidy

Are you surprised though that it has become an emotive subject?

Prime Minister

I was very disappointed with the way some people have just spoken about unemployment benefits as though there were a decision to knock off unemployment benefits and as though that was the only decision had in fact been made, because when you have a Schools Commission Report saying quite plainly that today's schools are failing the majority of young Australians because the schools are orientated towards academic tertiary training and that is not what is going to happen to most young Australians, then surely Governments should be expected to do something about it.

Cassidy

It won't mean, Prime Minister will it, that we will simply have a better educated unemployed?

Prime Minister

No I do not believe so, because - and I am not trying to underestimate the difficulty of people getting work - but a lot of young people leave school and do move smoothly into a job, we know that. We also know there are 50,000 or a bit more under-18 who are on unemployment benefits. I can think of nothing more disillusioning for a young Australian. Let us just go through what has happened to him or to her for a moment.

Prime Minister (continued)

The sort of person being described by the Schools Commission Report has not done well at school, and the Schools Commission Report is making the point that I think I did about a year ago somewhere; that it is the school really that has failed the student because there are not courses that suit that particular student's capacities. So, the person has not fitted in too well at school, has not been particularly excited, has not been able to develop his or her talents at school, leaves school and because his talents and inclinations have not been properly developed and trained in the kind of courses that would have suited that person finds it harder than many others to get a job, and then becomes doubly disillusioned because he or she is not able to get a job. That is the sort of circumstance that must be occurring to a lot of these people in the 15 to 16, 17 year old age bracket. I do not underestimate the role of the economy, of the need for an expanding economy, of more jobs overall. Of course that is the other side of the coin. But if these young Australians are to be given a fair chance in whatever economy we are able to establish, surely we owe them something better than a school system that the Schools Commission says has failed them and then the dole. Now, that is what the Government is after doing something about.

Cassidy

So Prime Minister, you are speaking in terms that it could be a reality then, that in fact you may be taking away the dole from the 16 and 17 year olds.

Prime Minister

No. Look, again, one of the very real questions - not just before Governments because we have thrown this whole position out into the open for debate, and I think we were right to expect that it will be debated calmly and on its merits and on the basis of what is in fact best for young Australians in the 16 to 17 year old age group. If you have got the circumstances where they have got adequate training at school or at a technical college, one or the other, we have a completely open mind about it, but at least training that is suited to their needs so that they will be better equipped to move into the workforce and get a job that will be constructive and rewarding to them. Now, let us take a 16 year old. He cannot get an immediate job. The option of training is available to him, training which the best vocational guidance indicates is suited to his talents and to his inclinations, if that training is available would you, as a member of society, want to leave him the option of just getting unemployment benefits? I am not asking you to come to a conclusion. I am asking you to, with an open mind, to examine the question. If you said, well for low income families that extra money might have been quite important, all right, we have also said we are looking at the system of allowances that is available to low income families so that kids do not have to be penalised because of that.

Cassidy

If there was a guarantee though that he could be provided with work at the end of that extra two years education, perhaps then it might be more acceptable.

Prime Minister

But at the end of that extra two years he would be 18, wouldn't he.

Cassidy

That's right.

Prime Minister

At the end of that extra two years he would be 18, and that is not up for examination, it is the under 18s. The matter is for examination, and all I would ask is that everyone, when they are coming to look at this particular question, really - what is in the best interests of young Australians; the school system that, not Malcolm Fraser but the Schools Commission is not meeting the needs of a great majority of young Australians. Do something about that. They have better training, better education, so that the talents of these Australians who are in a sense pushed aside by the system can be given a fair chance in this society. Now if we can do that and achieve that in co-operation with the States, if you can have an adequate system of allowances to help low income families so that they are not put to greater hardship over those extra couple of years of schooling, then it is a real question: should the option of unemployment benefits still be available. And we have not made conclusions. We want a healthy, sensible debate about it and I would only ask people to have one thought in their minds when they are trying to come to a conclusion: what really is the best thing for young 16 and 17 year old men and women in Australia. What is the best thing for them? What do we owe them?