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## PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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### ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF INDEPENDENT CONFERENCE ON SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

I am very pleased to be with you tonight, and to have the opportunity to address a conference whose theme is the governance of schools.

The matter of governance, in a general sense, is one in which I suppose I have some experience. I can only hope that school governance is free of some of the problems that arise in governing a country. I am, of course, considerably less familiar with school governance - although while I was Minister for Education, I developed an abiding interest in the role of Government in the educational process. And in this context I wish to make a few comments about the present and future role of this Government in education.

Let me say at the outset that the Government views with very great satisfaction the present strength of independent schools in Australia and the strong support that independent schools are receiving from the community.

We have consistently maintained, from the very first, that choice in education is a fundamental element of a free society. It was an earlier Liberal Government which originally introduced the concept of State aid, a concept which was decisively upheld from a constitutional point of view in the High Court's decision earlier this year.

The Government's objectives in education involve promoting freedom of choice and equality of opportunity in schooling, while aspiring to standards of excellence at all levels, and at the same time helping the disadvantaged in the community. Our wish is to see that access to choice in schooling is open to the widest possible cross-section of the community. To advance this objective, the Government must plainly make a financial contribution to independent schools as well as to Government schools - and the level of contribution to independent schools must be considerable.

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In the early 1970s, for reasons which I need not go into, a bleak future seemed to lie ahead for the independent schools. Financial problems mounted, and solutions were hard to find. Between 1972 and 1977, the number of independent schools in this country actually declined by 65. - and that is a lot of schools to close down. An increase in Commonwealth support was necessary in order to redress the balance which had almost been destroyed in earlier years.

The facts seem to show that our efforts have borne fruit, for in the two years after 1977, the number of independent schools increased by 75 and over the last three years (1977 to 1980) enrolments in independent schools have risen by 37,000, comprising 20,000 at the primary level and 17,000 at the secondary. Putting the secondary figures in a different way, the proportion of secondary students enrolled in independent schools has risen from 24.4% in 1977 to 26.4% in 1980, and projections for 1984 suggest that this proportion will increase by one or two further percentage points.

The implication of these figures is unmistakable - a large number of Australian parents wish their children to be educated in independent schools.

If the position of independent schools was deteriorating in the early seventies, the reason was not that this type of education was less attractive to Australians - the reason was rather that the Government of the day adopted policies the effect of which - and possibly the intent of which - was to weaken the independent school sector. We opposed this trend utterly. Our support for an independent sector is not support for an exclusive sector but for a more widely accessible independent sector.

The aim of our policies is to place more, not less, Australian parents in the position where they can choose which kind of school best suits their children. If the education offered by a particular school suits a particular child then we would increasingly want to see a system in which the parents of that child would be in a position to send their child to that school. That is what freedom of choice in education means.

I cannot emphasise too strongly that we support the independent sector - not because it is exclusive, but in order to make it more accessible. More and more parents are becoming alive to the importance of education and more and more are feeling an obligation to seek out the kind of education which seems best suited to their children. It would be a tragedy if in this situation fewer parents were able to make the choice they really wanted.

While choice is a fundamental reason for the support we give to it, the independent school sector provides a range of further benefits for the Australian educational system. If all schools were Government schools, there would be an inevitable shift towards a monopolistic and bureaucratic control of education - and education is surely an area in which monopoly and excessive bureaucracy can have only the most damaging consequences.

Government funding itself, of course, must be carefully watched on its impact on the independence of independent schools. It would plainly be self-defeating if the independent schools were to become wholly dependent upon Governments. While independent schools currently receive considerable Government support, the future of each particular school depends fundamentally on the quality and attractiveness of the education which it offers.

Independent schools have no forced clientele. If enrolments fall off at an independent school no bureaucratic fiat to swell its numbers will come forward to save it. This surely is a desirable discipline as well as a challenge.

Schools which depend upon voluntary enrolments have a strong incentive to adapt to the demands of changing conditions. And within the independent school sector there is a degree of diversity which must surely provide a stimulus to adaptation and change right across the spectrum of schools. This is not to say that experimentation is going on only with the independent school sector - the Government sector has equally made a major contribution. But the kind of experimentation which can occur in an independent sector cannot be guaranteed under a centralised education system.

There is a fundamental reason why this is so - and I will expand upon it because it applies in many areas of life beyond education. The independent schools provide this diversity and experimentation because they are responsive to the values of different groups in Australian society - they reflect the diversity of our society. They are responsive because ultimately the parents who send their children must themselves pay a substantial proportion of the costs - so the schools must provide the education that a sufficient number of parents want, or else close down.

Institutions which are closely identified with what people want will remain healthy and strong because they are in a state of continuing renewal as people's wants change and develop. Placing control over the allocation of funds to institutions in the hands of those whom I will broadly call the "users" is the best possible guarantee of their continuing health and vitality. In few areas of life is this more important than in education for the vitality and adaptiveness of our whole society is so much bound up with the appropriateness of our education to the needs of our children. Institutions which are less subject to the mechanism of "user-control" experience greater difficulty in adapting to changing needs.

We are emphasising the "user pays" or "user controls" concept as part of our wider approach to encourage a dynamic adaptation throughout Australia to the needs of the 1980s and beyond. We have been doing that in our recent decisions to transfer a number of Government enterprises to the private sector and in our recent health decisions.

Total Government control over any institution can lead to rigidities, inefficiencies and a lack of responsiveness which we believe Australia can ill afford in the challenging period ahead of us. A strong independent school sector encourages the adaptive potential of our educational system. It is an important element in Australia's capacity to face the future with confidence. And it is to the need to adapt that I now turn.

Your programme for this conference lists papers on the relationships between governing bodies and principals, bursars, parents, past pupils and so on. But I see no paper explicitly addressing the relationship between the governing bodies and the needs of present pupils. In the rest of my remarks I would like to address the question: "What kind of education do we owe our children in the rest of the eighties, given the challenges that confront Australia?". What do schools - and parents - owe to the children who come within their care? What is the role of Government, and more particularly, what system of education should Governments encourage and provide for? All these questions have acquired particular urgency in recent years.

I want to discuss them with particular reference to the need of our young people to find satisfying jobs in the years ahead. You all know that numbers of young people who should be able to work productively are unable to find employment when they leave school. The fact that this situation exists gives the Government, as well as parents, schools and students great concern. It is a situation which neither society nor the Government is willing to accept.

It is important not to get the problem out of perspective, for the great majority of school leavers either proceed to tertiary education or else find employment quickly and I am pleased to say that youth unemployment is now dropping quite fast as the economy gathers pace. Total teenage unemployment is now 13,400 below the level recorded in April, 1980 but it is still much too high. There is a minority who have real difficulties - and these difficulties cannot be overlooked. During 1980 about 20,000 15-17 year old young people were unemployed for at least eight months.

Through transitional programmes the Government is making a very considerable contribution designed to enable these young people to find jobs and be able to cope with them. And let me refer here to reports a few months ago that the Government was proposing to withdraw unemployment benefits from 16 and 17 year olds - for never have I known a greater perversion of a public debate. Our proposal was first to get a situation in which there would be worthwhile courses, together with adequate secondary allowances for the disadvantaged and then, and only then, to consider - merely consider - whether the young people concerned should be left with the option of going on the dole and possibly thereby lose for years the chance of getting a job. How false an impression of that proposal was conveyed to the people of Australia.

The situation that confronts young people is the product of a variety of factors. There is the economic situation, in other countries as well as our own, there is a higher participation rate in the work force, there are problems of wage relativities which have made it difficult for many young people without experience to appear attractive to employers.

In addition to such factors, young people are perhaps more selective about the kind of employment they will undertake, and there is also the well-known Catch 22 problem that it is hard to get a job without experience, and impossible to get experience without a job.

These factors all have a place in explaining the current problems with youth unemployment. But a further factor is that many of the people concerned have inadequate skills and inadequate training. They have not received the kind of education which they required.

It is easy to over-simplify the problems that are opened up by this consideration. I think it is generally agreed that schools must be adaptive to the requirements, the interests and the enthusiasm of pupils. Every teacher knows how vital it is to capture the interests of students. The teacher believes almost as a matter of faith that there is in all young people some latent curiosity, some enthusiasm - no matter how much hidden - to acquire knowledge. If only the teacher can strike the right note then there will be a take-off even with the least promising students.

A point which has received an entirely proper emphasis in recent times is that while many schools provide well for pupils who have an academic bent and who are suited to tertiary studies, they provide much less well for pupils of a more practical disposition. One of the most pressing responsibilities of secondary schools is to those students who wish to leave school early and start working. These are the students whose needs are not being met - whose interests are not being captured, whose enthusiasms are not being exploited, whose natural abilities are not being harnessed, whose self-confidence is not being built up. In earlier times, it was often thought that these students were simply failures. But it is now increasingly accepted that it is the system that is failing - not the students who do not get much out of it.

Surely there must be a relevant and a useful education which will serve the needs and at the same time capture the interest of every child. If we do not find that education, then surely we have failed the child. And if a few students would leave school feeling they had gained little no matter what had been offered to them, feeling they were failures, then surely we can make sure that they are very few indeed.

In the vast majority of cases, when children leave school with a sense of failure or frustration, the inescapable conclusion is that the school has failed them. It is obviously easier to say these things than to work out suitable curriculums - or to finance them. There is a range of challenges that teachers, schools - and perhaps even governing bodies - must try to meet.

It is not clear, for example, that the kind of knowledge and skills that students will be interested to acquire will necessarily satisfy the requirements of employers. Again, the skills and knowledge that are attractive to the employers of today may not enable the students concerned to adapt to the changes of tomorrow - yet education should surely aim to teach young people how to make the kinds of adaptations that are likely to be necessary during their lifetimes.

Further, young people do not always like what they are best at - which means that there may be a gap between capturing their interest and providing them with the skills which may best enable them to obtain satisfactory employment.

Secondary schools also face the challenge of not knowing, at least in the early years, whether a student will want to go on to further education, or whether he will wish to leave school as early as possible and start working. It is easy for those of us outside the educational system to underestimate these challenges which are in many ways most acute during the earlier years of secondary education. But unless they are confronted in the early years, the problems that are currently arising for 16, 17 and 18 year olds will remain.

The challenges to schools, and to everyone concerned about education, are obviously very great indeed, and the Australian community rightly believes that they have not yet been met satisfactorily.

Is it too hard to develop courses which will tap the talents of more of our children, courses that will capture their interest and meet their practical needs? I do not believe that this is too hard or that our society or our school system lacks the capacity to meet the challenges.

The Government will co-operate both with the States and with schools to help meet them. A major responsibility of Government is to make sure that we have the system that is best calculated to provide our children - all of them - with the kind of education which we owe them. That is why we place so much emphasis on encouraging a healthy independent school sector.

The matters that I have talked about tonight concern all schools, and in the independent school sector the solutions depend very much on an awareness of the needs and the opportunities on the part of school governors and staff. The academic achievements of the independent schools are well-known and respected. As the needs of pupils change I have not the slightest doubt that the independent schools can adapt in ways that parents and pupils would want. Independent schools - or many of them - have changed and adapted to a remarkable degree. The independent schools have over many centuries made an incalculable contribution to the civilisation of which we are the heirs. I have no doubt that provided their accessibility to as many parents as possible is maintained they will continue to do so.