



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS UNION NATIONAL CONFERENCE
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Ladies and gentlemen

I am very grateful for the opportunity to address you - even though I am still officially off duty.

This was supposed to be a curriculum day.

But with our history being debated in the papers every day, our national honour sullied again in the British press, every day the expectation that one will be blamed for something else going wrong over there, one is inevitably drawn back to the world of controversy.

And what better place to re-join it than a teachers conference - an education conference?

Education will always be controversial. There will always be arguments about it for the simple reason that it is so important.

It concerns the most basic instincts: to advance the interests of our children. To give them a chance in a competitive world. To assure their future.

Education is prone to passionate controversy because there is so much at stake.

Yet I imagine if the question were to be asked here - What should an education system aim to achieve? - there would be remarkably broad agreement.

No doubt there would be argument over emphases and over details.

But I don't think many people here would disagree fundamentally with an answer along the following lines.

Our education system should prepare young Australians for life and for the future.

Our education system should serve the interests of each and every individual - and it should serve the interests of Australia.

It should be truly relevant: meaning it should instruct young people both in those values we hold as universal and unchangeable, and in the skills and knowledge they will need if they are to play a rewarding role in modern society.

It should be both humanitarian and utilitarian: meaning it should have a moral core - it should encourage belief and trust in the institutions, values and traditions of Australia and in liberal democracy; and it should equip students with a knowledge, including an historical knowledge, of Australia and the world.

And it should teach the skills our country needs to grow and succeed, and our people need to increase their life opportunities and their material well-being.

It should be efficient and it should be fair. It should deliver the best possible education to all Australians, regardless of their parents' circumstances.

No doubt there are other useful aims and other ways of expressing them, but I don't believe many people here would dispute them fundamentally.

And I think it's important to remember that essentially there is agreement about education.

We should etch this in our minds, and when we start to argue about the details or the best means of delivering education, we should recall that we share the view that education is vitally important, that it is a wellspring of useful, happy lives and a good society.

Today we would add to this, I'm sure, our belief that an education system should offer education and training not just to the young but to people of all ages.

The modern world demands that education should not stop with the end of secondary school or college or university.

Increasingly, skill formation will be a lifelong process: the institutions will need to be there to provide them; and our schoolteachers will need to be there, providing young Australians with the knowledge and approach to learning which will allow them to acquire skills throughout their lives.

The world of my own youth made no such demands.

I left school at fifteen - at a time when a very small proportion of Australians completed secondary school. In my area, Bankstown, I doubt if one in ten did.

It was the norm to leave at fifteen in the 1950s.

Like other fifteen year olds I could leave because there were jobs to go to.

But the job I went to no longer exists.

That is the crucial point to understand.

The systems and technology which have so remarkably advanced productivity have come at the price of jobs.

Many of the old jobs are gone. The so-called dead end jobs are largely gone.

In the new world that our children are now inheriting the nation's wealth and life's opportunities will depend more and more on the skills of our workforce.

It's been said before, but it was never so true - education and training are the keys to our success.

That is why in the past decade we have made the effort necessary to increase the number of students completing secondary school from 3 in 10 to 7 in 10.

It is why we have created over 200,000 higher education places - the equivalent of twenty new universities.

And it is why last year we decided to establish the Australian National Training Authority, as part of a wider process of reform to raise the quality and status of vocational education and training to the level of the other tiers of education.

It is also why such a great responsibility devolves on you - Australian teachers.

You have already borne much of the burden of change, and you will have to bear more of it in future.

It is on you that our success substantially depends.

You will need assistance - and today I pledge you that.

We realise that these great structural changes ultimately are made by and affect people; and they will be made most effectively by people who have faith in what they are doing, and know that society has faith in them.

We recognise that you who teach are the building blocks of educational achievement, and no reforms which fail to recognise the need for your professional trust and enthusiasm can hope to succeed.

Ladies and gentlemen

I said that there is general agreement about the aims of education.

The arguments generally concern the best means of realising our ambitions.

Most of these can be settled by discussion and negotiation. If we never seem to get the perfect system, we do manage to improve it.

But there is a point in this debate beyond which we cannot go - and that is the point which the Coalition presently occupies.

Our political opponents will probably not argue with the higher purposes of education I spelt out a moment ago.

But they will tell you that the best way to achieve those ambitions is to reduce the equity in delivery.

They say equality equals mediocrity - they cannot imagine that we can have excellence in a system which is fair.

I cannot imagine having it in a system which is not fair.

I say if we do not seek fairness and equity in something so basic as education we squander the efforts of generations, we betray our democratic values, and we condemn Australians in the future to the social trauma which flows from massive and deliberate inequality.

Equity and excellence are not incompatible concepts.

Nor do we accept the view which recurs so often through the Coalition's policies: that if the strong are to prosper, support for the weak must be diminished.

Dr Hewson has flip-flopped on Fightback and is now doing an excruciating imitation of a soft toy.

He is trying to speak a new conciliatory language. He is talking about the need to put certainty in people's lives.

The kind of certainty Jeff Kennett has put into the lives of Victorians.

The kind of certainty which flows from the unfettered free market of which the real Dr Hewson is an avid disciple.

The kind of certainty Mrs Thatcher brought to the lives of the British people and Reaganomics brought to Americans. The certainty which comes when the safety net is ripped away, and the creed takes hold that fairness equals mediocrity.

The kind of certainty which the Federal President of Dr Hewson's Liberal Party described last week in a speech in which he said " .. one Nobel Prize winner is worth more than hundreds of mediocre practitioners".

Worth more what? Worth more to whom?

A speech in which he said, echoing the old - or real - Dr Hewson, that lifting the average meant dragging up "laggards" and pulling down "leaders".

One week before John Hewson pledged himself to putting more certainty in the lives of Australians, his Federal President, Mr Goldsworthy said this:

Life has to become tougher - with less security and greater uncertainty.

Greater uncertainty.

Dr Hewson's idea of certainty is the kind which underpins his education policy: that is, the kind which flows from unleashing theoretical market forces on education.

The kind which will follow from his policy of shifting resources from those schools which have the least resources to those which have the most.

I do not want to dwell on the Opposition's policies - I would rather talk about our own.

But some remarks must be made about education under the Coalition.

The Coalition proposes a system of student vouchers for vocational training. They would take the Government's growth commitment of \$720 million and re-direct it through a voucher scheme: and, in doing that, they would remove the foundations of our agreement with the States and Territories to establish the Australian National Training Authority and a national approach to planning.

These vouchers would be available to young people on or about the youth wage levels of \$3.00 or \$3.50 an hour. Those on higher wages would not be eligible.

To take advantage of a voucher, a young person would be required to negotiate an employment contract involving time off for training, or find training opportunities outside of working hours.

The voucher policy is both inequitable and unworkable. It is an administrative fantasy. It raises doubts about whether the growth funding would ever be spent. Certainly there must be doubt whether it will be spent where it is needed.

Indeed it may be more than an oversight that the Coalition has not included any funding provision for the voucher policy in the costings for Fightback Mark II.

The Coalition's policies on vocational training threaten to give concrete expression to John Howard's fantasy about dead end jobs.

In combination they would destroy our chances of building a skilful society by removing the essential funding, structures and incentives.

The same thinking governs their policy on University education, and similar results would follow.

The Opposition want to allow those who can afford to do so to pay for a place at University, even if they have not earned a subsidised place on the basis of academic merit.

The cost of a university degree is between \$25,000 and \$130,000.

Existing fee-free places would become subsidised places in an ill-defined system of student vouchers.

We do not yet know what level of cost will be covered by the voucher.

We do know that universities would be free to set their own fees on all courses.

And we know that students would be personally liable for costs in excess of the voucher's value.

The consequences for equity of access to University are plain and unmistakable.

As far as schooling is concerned, I suppose I could do worse than simply ask for a minute's silence while we think of Mr Kennett.

You don't need me to tell you about Mr Kennett.

The alternative Commonwealth government has in mind dismantling public education in Australia. They will achieve this by a couple of simple policy measures, both of which were launched in Fightback I and live on in Fightback II.

The only area of schooling which would receive any significant increase in support under a Hewson Government would be wealthy private education.

At the same time Federal grants to the States, and by implication to State schools, will be cut. This is a blatant shift of public resources from State to private schools.

It will be perceived in many quarters as an attack on government schools and may well re-open the old State Aid debate.

The second major policy measure proposed by the Opposition would involve a major re-distribution of resources between non-government schools: the existing twelve categories of need would be collapsed into six, to the overwhelming advantage of those at the top.

The type of private school which will benefit most from this re-distribution will include Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar, which are currently in Category One.

These schools will receive a funding increase of over fifty per cent.

The schools to receive the lowest increase will be - you guessed it - Aboriginal schools and special schools for students with a disability. That is, those schools currently in Category Twelve.

We are talking about more than policy differences here. These are policies reflecting an ideological fixation with the belief that - to quote John Hewson Mark I - the poor will drag us down. The same school of thought which insists that equity and excellence can't co-exist. That you can't raise the average without helping undeserving "laggards".

In so far as the Hewson funding increases will provide for needy private schools, the Federal Government's announced increases will effectively do the same, and in a climate of stability and certainty for the entire sector.

Under the Government's policy, schools in category 12 will receive real increases in Federal funding every year until the Year 2000. Schools like Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar will simply have their much smaller grants maintained at the same level in real terms.

If Hewson's promised windfall to wealthy private schools does have the effect of re-igniting the State Aid debate, questions about education quality, teacher training and schools reform will be buried under arguments about resource allocation - acrimony of the kind which polarised the Australian community for a decade in the 1960s.

If there is anyone involved in Australian education who believes there is no substantial difference between the Government and the Opposition, they should think again.

As my colleague Kim Beazley has said, the Liberal Party's education policy is a triumph of ideology over rationality.

I think it is fair to say that Government policy has tried to attend to needs and facts.

In higher education, for instance, through a period of exceptional growth we have been able to maintain a fair system of student income support and provide undergraduate and post-graduate courses without up-front fees.

The challenge now is to consolidate the expanded system and improve its quality.

We will continue to provide for growth - there will be a further 25,000 increase in student numbers between 1992 and 1994.

And we will provide for exciting new forms of opportunity through the development of the Open Learning Initiative.

I am well aware that, despite this growth, excess demand for university places remains high.

The answer is not to provide a university place for all who apply.

Apart from being an unreasonable burden on taxpayers, it would result in a major mismatch between the skills we have and the skills we need.

The answer lies in the provision of fair access to a comprehensive and balanced range of education and training options. To achieve this we will need, not only measured growth for universities, but a major expansion and improvement of vocational education and training - by which I mean both entry level training arrangements and more advanced TAFE courses.

I am sure most of you are aware of the initiatives we have taken last year.

Under a new national vocational education and training system an additional \$720 million will be provided over the 1993-1995 triennium.

It will be a genuinely national system, with agreed goals and priorities established through a Ministerial Council, and planned and funded through the Australian National Training Authority.

The system will enjoy the close involvement of industry and encourage the growth of a network of high quality training providers.

It is an historic initiative, and one of which we are very proud.

It's a rational, decisive and coherent response to change. A response to need. It will bring us, within the decade, up to the level of the best in the world.

Considerable as the undertaking is, in a sense the development of ANTA represents only part of a wider strategy of taking a national approach to education.

This dates back to the Hobart Declaration on Schooling in 1989 when, for the first time in our history, Australia's eight State and Territory education ministers agreed on national goals.

For the first time the development of frameworks for national curriculum and assessment in Australian schools was set in train.

For the first time employers were brought to the negotiating table on education issues.

When all eight of the National Curriculum Statements on key learning areas and their assessment profiles are completed in June this year, for the first time parents and employers will have access to common curriculum frameworks which relate to all Australian schools.

We will be able to produce education resource materials to support the national statements at a fraction of their present cost: and these economies of scale will also make regular curriculum review and renewal much easier.

Beyond the material gains there is, if you like, the national one. As we approach the second century of our nationhood, we will have at last an education system which can meet the nation's needs and express its character and purpose.

Ladies and gentlemen

Earlier I said that the Government is aware of the change teachers have had to accommodate in recent years.

And we are aware that change is going to continue in the next decade. As Kim Beazley points out in his Ministerial Statement, the prospect is daunting.

It will save you from an insufferably long speech if I simply recommend his Statement to you, and progress quickly toward the Prime Ministerial prerogative of announcing the good news.

It goes without saying that the success of our educational endeavours depends critically on teachers.

The Government is of the view that the vast majority of teachers are dedicated and well able to deliver the necessary change.

There is no doubt that not all the community is so well disposed. There is a belief that some teachers are not contributing, and even though this may not be in proportion to the facts, the hard truth is that the teaching profession cannot afford to carry either the passengers or the reputation that goes with them.

For while education depends on many players, it depends most of all on teachers: on their skills and their understanding of future directions.

This is an age when success depends on productivity improvement and industry reform, and the education industry can be no exception.

All parties involved, especially employers and teacher unions, will have to take up the challenge. I don't believe that should be a cause for anxiety: in my experience, those who

have taken on the task of industry reform never want to return to the old industrial culture.

We are aware that change is stressful - both the experienced of change and the anticipation of it. We are aware of the absolute need for support.

The typical teacher today was trained twenty years ago when only about thirty per cent of students completed secondary school.

Support and training are required to meet the needs of the extra forty per cent of students who now complete it.

Work is continuing on the development of the key competencies essential for effective participation in the emerging forms of work and work organisation, and these will require new expertise from the teachers and trainers who will deliver them.

There will be increased demands on teachers to keep up with developments in subject content, communications technology, interactive computer software; and in coming to grips with the new structures which will integrate schools, TAFE and higher education.

To help equip teachers for the challenges they face, to encourage and increase their professionalism, to give them the training and support they need, I am pleased to announce today that the Federal Government will commit \$130 million over the next three years.

\$20 million has been allocated to support the development of the seven key competencies to a stage where they can be incorporated successfully into the school curriculum. About \$10 million of this allocation will be earmarked for teacher training.

Up to \$105 million will be available for new professional development activities over the next three years.

At this stage I might make the observation that these measures hold a particular significance for the women who comprise seventy per cent of the teaching workforce.

Raising the status of teachers, as we are determined to do, raises the status of women and enables them to contribute more effectively to national objectives.

It is perhaps significant that this organisation has been the means of career breakthroughs for two of your past leaders - Di Foggo, your former President who is now on the Industrial Relations Commission, and Jennie George, another former President, who is now Assistant-Secretary of the ACTU.

I might say also that these new measures of professional support will assist women who need to refresh their skills on return to the profession after a period of parental leave.

Sixty million dollars will be provided over the next three years to establish a National Teachers' Professional Development Program to renew and increase teachers' knowledge of their subject disciplines.

Some of the funds will go towards support for National Teacher Forums which provide opportunities for teachers and university academic staff to share information.

The Government will be allocating five million dollars towards a Quality Schooling Program which, in addition to funding projects in the areas of school leadership, school organisation and student welfare, will support the establishment of the proposed National Teaching Council.

The National Teaching Council, we sincerely hope, will be an important step towards higher levels of professionalism among teachers, and a vehicle for the greater involvement of teachers in the reform of education and the teaching profession itself.

If the object of providing these new funds can be summarised, it is to allow teachers to play a central role in determining their own professional development needs within the context of emerging national priorities.

There is no question that our aims will not be fulfilled without improving the productivity of teachers.

There will have to be changes in the way teachers work.

The National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning has developed the National Schools Project which, in 150 schools across Australia, has introduced new ways of working with the potential for real productivity gains.

These include greater use of para professionals; flexible timetabling outside traditional school hours; and flexible class sizes to suit the needs of schools.

Flexibility is the key in modern education, as it is in modern industry and business - and as it must be in government and unions.

It goes without saying that governments need to work with teachers and their unions and with education systems to develop ways of working which will create a more effective teaching environment and a better quality education.

The need for teachers to renew and expand their knowledge and skills, and to modify their teaching methods, presents an obvious challenge for teacher education of all kinds.

The Federal Government recognises, in particular, the important role played by higher education institutions in the pre-service and in-service training of teachers.

As the major funding source for Australian Universities, the Federal Government provides over \$420 million a year for teacher training within higher education institutions.

Teacher education faculties have had their fair share of change and uncertainty in recent times, particularly in the wake of major reforms in the higher education system.

They have also had their fair share of criticism.

Not all the criticism is justified, but doubtless some is. It is indisputable that staffing rigidities in many teacher education faculties are an obstacle to the renewal of courses.

It is significant that fifty per cent of teacher education academics were school teachers before 1973 and only twenty per cent have taught in schools in the 1980s.

To their credit, many universities have established strategies for the renewal of their education faculties, and others are developing them. For those institutions the Government will advance operating grant funding to assist in the early retirement of staff.

Ladies and gentlemen

The announcement of this new funding package for the professional development of teachers is just one element of a comprehensive policy framework encompassing all the sectors of school, TAFE and higher education.

Our goal remains to make education accessible to all, and, in particular, to assist those people in the workforce who need further training or re-training to keep their jobs and their industries alive.

We say that a fair and equitable education system, especially a fair and equitable school system, will as readily deliver excellence and opportunity as an unfair one.

And we say that a fair one will deliver a good society.

We see our efforts in education as an effort to extend Australian social democracy - bringing our educational standards up to those we have achieved in such areas as health, social security, human rights including the rights of women.

We should be and can be as good at education as we are at these things, which is to say as good as any country in the world.

And to be good at education is to be both excellent and equitable.

Education in the 1990s is the machinery which will deliver us a prosperous, strong and good society in the twenty-first century.

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It is the vehicle of change and there is no-one else to drive it but you - the teachers of Australia.

So we will support you, and work with you, and we will create the education system which Australians have a right to and we all want.

CANBERRA/MELBOURNE
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