



PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

**NEW EDUCATIONAL REALITIES CONFERENCE
MELBOURNE, 15 JUNE 1994**

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today - very pleased to address so many people whose concern is Australian education.

With an economy now performing as well or better than any in the world, with so much now in our favour, we have a marvellous chance to lay the basis of an Australian society which is fair and cohesive, rich in opportunity and reward.

A great responsibility falls on our generation to seize the opportunity. It falls particularly on people like yourselves because education is where one of the great efforts must be made. It will be fundamental to our success.

I am particularly pleased because you come from all parts of the education sector, from industry and from the wider community. Success depends on your involvement. Our modern education system needs your participation - your efforts, all your ideas.

If we are to be a sophisticated and cohesive society, a society through which run both the threads of ambition and those of tolerance and care; if we are to be a modern, competitive, successful society in which opportunity and the common good are both enlarged; if we want to succeed in the world and in our own region where so many chances are - our education system will have to meet the challenges.

If we want our children and succeeding generations to have the chances we have had and more, if we want them to trust in and maintain our democracy and our best traditions - our education system will have to pass on the knowledge and instil the faith.

If we want to put half a million Australians back in touch with the workforce; if we really want to make the good society a reality for all Australians - it is going to depend on our education system and the people who run it:- -

We will need what is fashionably called a "vision" - though I am not sure that "vision" is precisely the right word. I have a suspicion that sometimes visions have a little in common with hot air. I am not sure that the founders of compulsory primary education or our first universities talked about "vision" very much at all. I don't think the real visionaries ever do.

I think the best of them have been like the best of parents - they have simply taken every care and responsibility for the future of succeeding generations. They have had not just imagination but courage and persistence, and I daresay an absolute determination to see that policies and programs work.

So what I offer you today I'm less inclined to call a vision than a schedule of necessity - the series of things we need to do, must do and can do.

The worst judgement that can be passed on a government - or on a generation - is not that they lacked something as vague as vision but something as concrete as responsibility, the responsibility to do what was necessary to secure the future.

In this there is no substitute for effort - a great national effort. I have said this many times, I know. I said it in *One Nation* more than two years ago and I repeated it in the *White Paper* just a few weeks ago.

It is not just rhetoric - it is the only way to succeed.

We are all aware of the criticisms which are made of us: bureaucracies for not following through and delivering; business for standing back and not getting involved; government for not having the imagination or courage.

Well, the Government, I believe has shown the imagination and courage in education. And I believe business will get involved - it is so obviously in their interests. And the bureaucracy will deliver because government and business and every parent and every child in the country depends on it and we are watching.

In the past decade the Government has massively expanded Australian higher education. Seventeen universities have been created in the last eight years, many of them in areas away from the main urban centres.

We now enrol thirty per cent of all seventeen to twenty-two year olds. Today we can say that our higher education system is truly open and accessible.

Perhaps even greater than this achievement has been the dramatic increase in secondary school retention rates. In the space of a decade we more than doubled the number of young Australians completing Year 12.

But comparing the present with the past is much less useful than comparing it with where we have to be in the future. In international terms the present figure is acceptable but the base it came off was deplorable. Fourteen per cent of our young people still drop out of school early and don't go on to further education or training.

The *Youth Training Initiative* announced in *Working Nation* will maintain the momentum of reform. It is designed to reach these young people at this turning point in their lives, and stop the cycle of disadvantage and alienation.

Through the *Initiative*, unemployed fifteen to seventeen year olds will be case managed and assisted into worthwhile education, training or work opportunities.

Young people who are still unemployed after six months will be offered a variety of labour market and vocational training programs which may lead to permanent employment.

The *Youth Training Initiative* goes some way toward completing the expansion of post-compulsory schooling we began a decade ago.

Our record in vocational education and training is not similarly impressive. Only one in five Australians aged sixteen and seventeen are in vocational preparation. The OECD average is one in two. We have to reach a comparable level - and do so quickly.

This is the great education challenge for Australia in the nineties - to bring vocational education and training up to the level our economic and social ambitions demand. A level, for example, which compares with Germany, which has four times the number of apprentices relative to the size of the workforce and twice as many people with education or training qualifications other than university degrees.

Our objective - and all Australian governments have agreed to it - is that by the year 2001 ninety-five per cent of nineteen year olds will have completed Year 12 or an initial post-school qualification, or be participating in formally recognised education and training.

In a successful Australian economy of the future, the key competitive advantage will be our general skills.

To quote one very instructive example. Comparative studies of the hotel industry in Germany and Great Britain in the 1980s found that the productivity of German workers was fifty to sixty per cent higher than their British counterparts. The productivity of German hotel managers is also higher because they did not have to regularly monitor their staff. The difference was that the German workers had had specific vocational training and the British workers had not.

The same lesson can be drawn from the example of Australian car manufacturers who have embraced training to lift quality and productivity.

In cooperation with TAFE they developed a Vehicle Production Certificate. They now build world class cars. They export. The industry has a future. The car production workers have a future.

The moral of the story could be applied to the nation as whole. Our long term prosperity depends on nothing so much as the quality of our workforce - both their vocational skills and their general education.

Over the last five years we have taken measures to massively increase the quantum of vocational education and training.

In cooperation with the States and Territories, we established the Australian National Training Authority - ANTA - to drive the expansion.

It was a watershed in Commonwealth-State cooperation of the kind we need to succeed with in our education system, and we laid the foundation for expansion with \$1.1 billion in growth funding over the period 1993-1996.

In *Working Nation* we announced an ambitious plan for the expansion of entry level training by 50,000 places over the next two years. This program will be supported by a revised system of payments to employers who provide young people with training places.

The introduction of a training wage will also provide employers in new and emerging industries with a single scheme of payments. Traineeships will be expanded across the whole workforce and the supply of training places increased.

It is not enough to just expand the system. The system has to meet the goals we set it.

We need to find the means by which the different education sectors can be effectively linked with each other and with the worlds of work and culture. We need to make the system more responsive to economic and cultural change.

Post-compulsory education has been fundamentally changed by the increase in retention rates. Yet the curriculum still reflects the days when most of those completing senior high school were hoping to go on to university.

Now that a large proportion do not have this intention, schools need to provide studies which are integrated with relevant vocational education. In future there should be no segregation of general and vocational education.

That is why *Working Nation* announced the creation of a new *Australian Student Traineeship Foundation* - a scheme delivered through regional partnerships between schools and industry which will enable Year 11 and 12 students to combine school studies with work experience in local industry and off the job training.

The traineeships will allow young people to complete their training and apprenticeships in a shorter time. More generally, they should serve as a model for the next century - when schools must link as easily with vocational education and training as they now link with universities.

Similarly we must link industry and tertiary education - indeed, we need to escape from the tradition of keeping work and education in different spheres.

The task is to create an environment in which educational institutions and government authorities involve industry in mainstream planning and decision-making - and one where industry feels bound to be involved.

The delivery of tertiary education must be more flexible to meet the wider range of industry needs.

The introduction of the second stage of the Government's *Open Learning Initiative*, which includes the development of an electronic support network, will mean that employees will no longer have to spend time away from the workplace in order to gain qualification. Employers and education providers should be able to develop programs which meet the needs of individuals at their own pace, at their own place.

Employers also need to be involved in developing a more streamlined and responsible vocational sector. At present, they understandably complain about the maze of authorities, boards and processes they need to negotiate before they can get appropriate training programs.

The National Framework for the Recognition of Training, which was meant to solve this problem, has so far failed to deliver either national recognition or portability. In cooperation with State and Territory Governments, the Commonwealth is seeking the means of overcoming the problem.

One possibility is to increase the powers of ANTA, in order to give employers and training providers a "one stop shop" where training can be nationally accredited in a single streamlined process. *Working Nation* contained measures which will assist cooperation between business and training authorities. Administrative arrangements will be streamlined. Industry will be put in the driving seat to make training administration simple and relevant to industry needs.

The National Employment and Training Taskforce will enable traineeships to be fast-tracked. The new *Enterprise Stream* for traineeships will allow enterprises to develop their own training standards, develop their own nationally accredited programs and issue their own national vocational qualifications.

Working Nation suspended the *Training Guarantee* for two years, and it will be abolished altogether if business seriously commits itself to creating new entry level training places.

That really is the bottom line. None of these reforms will be effective unless business increases its own effort and cooperates with providers in setting directions for the future.

The presence of so many business people at this conference suggests that Australian industry is in fact keen to establish a genuine partnership with government and the education industry.

Industry wants more than specific vocational skills. They want employees with general skills, general knowledge, judgement, self-discipline, literacy and numeracy.

That is one very practical reason why the emphasis we are now placing on vocational education and training must not be seen as antithetical to traditional educational values. In fact, we should be strengthening those values as we go.

Education is a foundation of the nation's culture and strength. It is where knowledge and appreciation of our heritage and institutions is passed on; where our sensibilities are broadened; where moral, ethical and aesthetic faculties are shaped.

I don't think that I am alone in suspecting that some of these things are not the priorities they once were.

Yet our success as a nation and as a society, as much as the responsibility we have to our children, demands that we do not let these values slip from our education system.

Perhaps most of all, our children should know what the privileges and responsibilities of Australian democracy are. What their great inheritance is. What change is desirable and possible.

The creation of an Expert Group to provide the Government with a plan for a program of public education and information on Australian government, citizenship and the constitution may be seen in this context - that is, as a means of strengthening our democracy by enlivening our appreciation of it.

The composition and terms of reference of this group will be announced soon.

It is scarcely less important that we improve our understanding of the nations with whom increasingly we deal.

It will profoundly assist our relationship with the countries of our region if we understand the languages they speak.

Today less than four per cent of Year 12 students study an Asian language. Only twelve per cent are studying a second language of any kind. Yet the study of a second language has a substantial practical significance both for the student and for our national development.

In the Budget the Government announced funding for a joint Commonwealth/State *National Asian Languages Strategy* which will see all Australian school children in Years 3 to 10 learning a second language by the year 2006.

Sixty per cent of them will study one of four priority Asian languages - Japanese, Indonesian, Modern Standard Chinese and Korean - and forty per cent will study any other second language of their choice.

Twenty-five per cent of all Year 12 students will be studying a second language and one per cent of students will go on to do a "Year 13" in Asia under the *Young Australians in Asia Program*.

The program will greatly enrich our education system and with it the life of the nation. In one sense, it is one more practical step in the process of opening Australia up to the region and the world. In another sense, it is symbolic: symbolic of our willingness to meet other countries half-way in our relationships with them, and symbolic also of our will and capacity to devise for our education system new building blocks for necessary social and cultural growth.

If we are to enter the twenty-first century with an education and training system large enough and good enough to meet the aspirations of individuals and the needs of Australia, we will need a national effort.

We will need State and Territory Governments to cooperate with business, and business to engage as it has never done before. The States must streamline their training bureaucracies: business must increase its own training efforts and share the responsibility for shaping and implementing the training agenda.

As in so much else, the Australian education system will have to become more flexible. The borders between schools and vocational training, and between education and work, will need to come down.

Education must be a prime mover of necessary change, a vehicle by which the nation can grasp the unprecedented opportunities which are now presented and all Australians can share in the rewards and the responsibilities.

I said in Paris a few days ago that to be an Australian in this decade is to be present at a defining moment in our history. Your presence at this conference I take as encouraging evidence that you not only share this belief - but are willing to share the responsibility that flows from it.

Thank you