

**ADDRESS TO PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM
SYDNEY TOWN HALL
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The authority for the views that I present this evening derives heavily from the experiences of the thousands of teachers, students, parents and others who contributed to the work of the Independent Inquiry. The Inquiry also received excellent departmental assistance and, given the constraints imposed by the celebrated 'bear pit' character of politics in NSW, it has enjoyed a generally courteous response from our politicians. The tightrope that I must now traverse involves balancing the preservation of that good will against an obligation to our children and young people to press home the seriousness of the educational issues canvassed by the Inquiry.

What emerged from the exercise was a balanced recognition of the fundamental assets of the system, as well as its shortcomings. To restore public education to strong health 86 recommendations were presented. But not everything that has been recommended can be achieved in one fell swoop. Hence the recommendations have been explicitly framed as a ten-year plan.

Unless that plan or something similar to it is adopted as a framework for re-developing the public education system, then the system will simply drift towards second-class status. Public education is like a somewhat neglected prestige car – the built-in quality and performance are unmistakable but money needs to be invested and a major tune-up needs to occur if the full potential of the vehicle is to be realized. A wax and polish certainly would not go astray either. Nor would some reconsideration of the pay and working conditions of those who keep the vehicle ticking over. But even as things stand there is much impressive strength lying beneath the bonnet of the vehicle. The time for an overhaul is now. As Elvis Presley has said from the grave: "A little less talk and a bit more action, please".

What could reasonably have been expected by this stage?

It's now just under five months since the final section of the Education Inquiry Report was tabled. The contenders for government should be responding to the overall plan and declaring their intentions. It would be perfectly understandable if some elements of the plan were tagged as requiring more protracted consideration, while other elements - not too many considering the genesis of the plan – might be argued to be ill-advised or unattainable. The important thing is that a substantial beginning be made accompanied by a strong sense of future directions.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE RESPONSE SO FAR?

Teaching practice, professionalism and governance

Several factors contribute to a 'good start' in education, not least in importance being the quality of teaching. But sophisticated long-term research shows that class size also has an independent and significant effect. The best scientific evidence is strong on this point especially when it rests on the random allocation of teachers and students to different class arrangements, the replication or repetition of the experiments, and re-testing the findings with different types of data.

The Coalition's position on small class sizes is the strongest feature of its education policies.¹ The undertaking to set K-2 class sizes at an average of 21, beginning with schools serving disadvantaged communities, approximates to the recommendations of the Inquiry. A promising policy initiative would be a better and more certain one if a fixed maximum class size were to be stipulated rather than an *average*. The ALP has undertaken to increase the number of pre-schools attached to primary schools. With regard to small class sizes, the ALP is this year running what it calls a "Class Size Pilot".² One can only conclude from the published material that this project lacks the technical design features that would enable it to make a serious contribution to knowledge of the effects of class size.

The quality of teaching in our schools ranges from excellent and innovative to staid and un-involving. Improving the methods of teaching children and young people of varying potentials should be near the top of the list of priorities of a department whose fundamental business is education. The Inquiry has found that this is not the case in NSW and has recommended means of improving the situation. The ALP has announced today that it intends to make teaching and learning the highest priority across the Department of Education and Training and this intent must be welcomed although the specific means of doing so have yet to be outlined. A recent Coalition policy release³ promises an advocate within the education bureaucracy (a Chief Teacher) to champion the cause of teaching and learning in our schools. However, the Inquiry sees the correction of current flaws as needing the reform of departmental structures and thinking, as well as the provision of necessary funding (especially for professional development which at present is appallingly inadequate). The experience of front-line teachers must be represented in the top management groups. Unless these things are done the efforts of an advocate will flounder.

¹ Liberal Party/National Party, *Confronting the Issues that Matter, a Fresh Approach*, December, 2002

² Minister for Education and Training, *Class Size Pilot to Kick off in 2003*, Media Release, 21/1Q1/2003; Minister for Education and Training, *Smaller Class Size Pilot. Key Facts*, November, 2002. Sixty three schools will get an extra teacher to reduce the size of approximately 200 classes from kindergarten to year 3. More than 500 schools said to already have "smaller classes" will "participate in teaching and learning and professional development aspects of the pilot". One hundred schools will be evaluated. There will be a control group of 63 schools.

³ *Supporting teacher excellence: A Chief Teacher for NSW*, undated

The Coalition and the Inquiry are of similar mind in believing that the rate of change to curricula has an adverse impact upon the ability of teachers to concentrate on teaching and learning.⁴ The Board of Studies should be integrated into the Department of Education and Training so that the timing of educational changes and the general management of the schools can be better aligned. The Coalition policy speaks of retaining the Board of Studies, which we had not understood to be an issue, but says nothing of the administrative framework in which it should operate.

The provision of advanced educational opportunities within comprehensive schools is the single measure most likely to raise the quality of education within the public system and, as a consequence, the image and attractiveness of public schools. The Inquiry has presented a plan for achieving this in the realisation that, for example, comprehensive high schools account for 94% of students beginning their secondary education. Both the ALP and the Coalition would continue to operate the existing 27 selective high schools with the Coalition proposing an additional seven in Western Sydney and North Western Sydney.⁵ Having recently been trampled underfoot by an enraged sacred cow in full flight I'm personally in no rush to repeat the experience. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that the Coalition's plan would probably add another 1-2% of the Year 7 intake attending selective schools and therefore hardly dint the challenge of extending the academic abilities of able students in the comprehensive schools. What is needed is to put aside the mental set that in our state equates enhanced education with segregated schooling.

Another teaching issue to command the attention of the Inquiry is the frequent unavailability of a casual teacher when one is needed. The problem is a serious one. Therefore, it is pleasing to see measures designed to ease the problem being consolidated in an ALP Plan.⁶

Student welfare and discipline

The issue that was most frequently raised during the Inquiry was the disruptive behaviour of a minority of students. In the practical world it is sometimes necessary to exercise disciplinary sanctions, including suspension and exclusion. However, the experience of teachers and administrators confirms the need for a range of responses additional to traditional discipline.

The Inquiry was impressed by what it saw of existing measures that focus students' attention on unacceptable behaviour, and the work of school counsellors although the number of the latter needs to be greatly increased beyond the Government's commendable recent recruitment of additional staff. The Inquiry recommended that mental health school liaison officers be appointed to assist with the management of students whose mental problems lie outside the boundary of teachers' professional competence. I am unaware of any political response to this recommendation.

⁴ *Supporting Teacher Excellence*, p.3

⁵ Liberal Party, *Address to the Greater Western Sydney Business Connection Lunch*, 26/8/2003

⁶ ALP, *Casual Teaching. Labor's plan to meet demand for casual teachers*, 5th February, 2003

Many schools previously beset with major discipline problems have been 'turned around' by whole of school measures detailed in the Inquiry report. The measures do not involve going soft on bad behaviour. Rather, they invite responsible conduct. No policy undertakings have yet been forthcoming that capitalise on this invaluable experience. The Coalition's policy speaks of strengthening school discipline codes and who could disagree with such proposals as the banning of swearing at teachers and the confiscation of distracting items. But the inherent limitations of relying entirely on traditional discipline start to become more apparent when the policy declares:

Ensure that all students who are suspended undertake a comprehensive study program whilst they are away from school.

From time to time schools require the involvement of the police. That is common ground between the contending parties.⁷ But the Coalition's notion of posting police on a continuing basis to troubled schools,⁸ in the absence of positive discipline policies, ignores the reality that behaviour problems can have a variety of causes. For me the most disturbing revelation of the Inquiry was the corralling in a special compound at one school of misbehaving students whom everyone knew required specialised mental health assistance that was not available. A good discipline policy will acknowledge many possible courses of action, including the temporary involvement of police for specific purposes.

Integration of students with disabilities

Another of the hot issues in the Inquiry was the practical implementation of the policy of integrating students with disabilities into standard classes. The Government has undertaken to increase the funding for integration students to enable a number of the needs raised with the Inquiry to receive attention, including more preparation time and professional development for the teachers involved, the training of teachers' aides and the use of consultants.⁹ A recommendation that the procedures for applying for integration funding be streamlined is now policy. The Coalition has yet to declare itself concerning the effective handling of the integration of students with disabilities.

Social disadvantage

Schools serving disadvantaged communities are frequently staffed by inexperienced teachers. The Inquiry has recommended the creation of a professional incentive scheme to attract experienced and able teachers to work in disadvantaged schools. Neither the Coalition nor the ALP has yet responded to this proposal. The Government's initiative in 2003 of providing mentor support to new teachers in 51 schools, and the mandatory participation of overseas trained teachers in special orientation courses are good developments that accord with other Inquiry recommendations, but are

⁷ Premier of NSW, *Carr Releases Plan for Safer Schools*, News Release, 11/2/2003.

⁸ *Confronting the Issues that Matter*, p.6

⁹ Minister for Education and Training, *Watkins Announces Support Plan For Students With Special Needs*, Media Release, 24/10/2002

not substitutes for the increased availability of able, locally experienced teachers in disadvantaged schools. The only just announced increase in rent subsidies for teachers working in Western NSW and an expansion of the \$5,000 retention allowance should help stabilise school education in isolated rural communities.¹⁰ Today's announcement of a Priority Schools Help Program concentrating on 10 extremely needy schools should benefit the schools in question but much is already known and documented that could be used **now** to improve the prospects of the scores of disadvantaged schools around the state.

Educational gains considered modest in some quarters are major achievements within disadvantaged schools. That is why the Coalition's proposed introduction of performance tables to enable parents *to assess the performance of government schools*¹¹ is at odds with the insights and findings of the Inquiry and international studies in general.¹² It involves ascribing to school programs outputs that are heavily influenced by the social backgrounds of students and the presence or absence of pro-education influences in their lives. Please withdraw this damaging and demoralising policy. There are other positive ways of lifting the performance of disadvantaged groups detailed in the Inquiry report.

Buildings and amenities

Visits to more than 150 schools convinced the Inquiry that many schools are in poor physical shape. Sometimes the conditions were disgraceful. With the increased levels of expenditure now occurring on new and refurbished buildings and the design standards that are being implemented, the situation should improve over the next decade provided there is no slippage on the current level of investment. What is needed is a simple indicator showing whether the gap between need and provision is widening or closing. Those presently 'making do' need and deserve that information but neither side of politics has yet undertaken to provide it.

Vocationally relevant education

The Inquiry raised a number of issues concerning the current workability of this important aspect of school education including, notably, the widespread lack of cooperation between TAFE and schools. We have yet to see a policy on these issues from either party.

Conclusions

There remains a formidable list of Inquiry issues that have yet to draw a response from the contending parties. Meeting the needs of very able students in comprehensive schools is one such matter. Others include proactive forms of discipline, the provision of mental health support to

¹⁰ ALP, *The Three Rs. Labor's plan to recruit, retrain and retain teachers*

¹¹ Liberal Party of Australia, *Coalition to introduce Performance Tables for Schools*, 19th January, 2003

¹² ACER/OECD, 2001, *How Literate are Australia's Student?* Melbourne, Australian Council for Educational Research

schools, increasing the presence of able, locally experienced teachers in disadvantaged schools, ways of responding more adequately to disadvantaged groups of students, vocationally relevant education, and the state of buildings and amenities.

The Inquiry's quest of facilitating a society-wide discussion of key issues in public education will be incomplete until that list of matters on which neither side of politics has declared itself, is substantially shortened. Political representatives... will that quality education system so proudly maintained by previous generations, receive the overhaul it requires in order to meet the needs of our most precious asset, our young people?