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**Australian Education Unionism in the Age of Neoliberalism:  
Education as a Public Good, Not a Private Benefit**

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**Abstract**

The shift to neoliberalism in socio-political thinking across the western world has seen the once widely held value of the public good of education replaced by the notion of its private benefit. The complexity of the roles that education plays in society; for example, developing human capital and economic productivity, social cohesion and opportunity for personal development, is deepened by the struggle over ideological agendas. In Australia, this ideological shift has been accompanied by: (a) claims of falling teacher quality and poor student outcomes as justification for greater accountability on schools; (b) local school management and changes in employment relationships that attempt to link pay with external, standardised outcomes; (c) the imposition of national curriculum and testing regimes for schools; (d) the adoption of 'new public management' practices in schools; and (e) a continued government funding support for private schools. The 175,000-member Australian Education Union (AEU) has been the key voice defending the importance of public education as a public good and a cornerstone of democracy. Yet, despite the change to a social-democratic (Labor) Federal Government in 2007, neoliberal policies continue to drive the national education agenda. This article will describe briefly the current Australian political context following the election of a Federal Labor Government to show how policy from the former conservative government has been re-shaped to fit the new government's agenda in the area of testing, performance pay and new management practices, and to suggest how the emerging tensions between the education union and the government might be played out over the first term of government.

### ***Introduction***

The shift in public understanding of the place of education in Australian society led the National President of the Australian Labor Party, Dr Carmen Lawrence, to deliver the 50th Annual Chifley Public Lecture in 2004, on the topic “Education: Public Good or Private Benefit” (Melbourne University News, 2004). Lawrence was speaking in the context of the Howard Government’s neoliberal assault on public education. Yet, three years later when Labor finally came to office they would offer little by way of a change of policy direction.

From its beginnings in the mid twentieth century, the influence of neoliberalism on educational policy across the western world has both broadened and deepened. Social democratic governments no longer offer an alternative to market-driven approaches espoused by the neoliberals (Cooper, 2009). This has been particularly so in Australia. Australia is a relatively small country of 22 million people and in terms of the international neoliberal agenda has largely mirrored experiences elsewhere, yet it has its own character and identity as well as patterns of resistance to this agenda.

In Australia, education constitutionally is a state responsibility, yet as states lack major means of revenue-raising, the majority of funding for schools is from the Federal Government and now education is second only to health in terms of government expenditure. Increasingly, Federal governments have sought greater control over education direction through tied-grants for spending. Most state expenditure is on the government school sector and most Federal expenditure is on the non-government sector.

### ***Neoliberalism in education***

The neoliberal vision for education, as for all areas of human endeavour, has been to bring all human action into the domain of the market (Job, 2009). This is what Harvey refers to as “the commodification of everything” (Harvey, 2005, p.2). Under the rule of the market, it is argued, competition and choice will allow the fairest distribution of resources.

The ideological underpinnings of ‘choice’ are not new. Half a century ago, Friedman (1955) criticised ‘fairness’ enforced by the state in mixed economies, arguing that it was too difficult to determine what is ‘fair’ in distribution of goods and it is better, therefore, to let the market decide. Friedman argued that the educational market, monopolised as it was by government funded schools, could not pay close attention to customer needs. His answer was to introduce competition and give customers ‘alternatives’. This view ultimately gave rise to Friedman advocating a voucher system for education, wherein the Government would issue parents with vouchers, redeemable for a specified sum, at approved educational institutions. Parents could ‘top up’ their children’s education by spending additional money. The government’s role would be reduced to ensuring that schools met minimum standards and controlling the terms of the vouchers. Such a funding system, Friedman held, would be good for the education system and, through the creation of new mass markets, be good for the economy. Fifty years ago, these ideas appeared new and a confronting departure from what had been public policy in western mixed economies with a robust public sector.

### *Internationally*

As the philosophy of neoliberalism has gained prominence in education internationally, it has attracted widespread criticism. In the USA, Apple (1996) considered the rationale for the market view of education from a critical standpoint. Inequality under the market, according to Apple, is seen by neoliberals as a good thing – and more inequality as even better – because under such a view, making the rich richer ultimately helps the poor. This is a simplistic view, Apple points out, as society involves much more than the market.

In Apple's view, the neoliberal rationale attempts to strengthen who and what has been traditionally privileged in society. This is a view which sees the nuclear family, in a traditional sense, as a guardian of stability and a wedge against the welfare state and feminism. As well, this view holds that the poor would not be so poor if they had strong family structures that imparted moral values of hard work and obedience (Apple, 1996).

Those who perceive failing educational standards and a 'back to basics' movement have called for a return to more traditional approaches to teaching and learning and, in turn, have assisted in the rise of parental choice, business performance management and accountability mechanisms. Consequently, these have led to a benchmark testing regime and league tables of school performance (Doecke, Howie and Sawyer, 2006; Nicholas and Berliner, 2007).

In the American context, Apple saw the neoliberal shift in education as supported by, though not synonymous with, a neo-conservative (Christian values and 'back to basics') coalition. Together the two groupings speak powerfully. Although not involving the same powerful Christian right movement, in the Australian context, Marginson (1997a) traced the development of the 'new right' and claimed a link between a push for marketisation in education and 'new right' concerns about educational standards.

In the United Kingdom, Ball (2008) argued the neoliberal impetus toward the privatisation of state schooling had become highlighted in the English school system following the Education Reform Act 1988 (ERA). Privatisation was taken up and progressed much further by 'new Labour' than it had under the Conservatives. Ball saw that the ERA set in train two types of privatisation; first, an endogenous form of privatisation which involved the creation of markets within and between schools requiring them to act like businesses, in a business-like way. This involved parental choice, devolved budgets, testing and league tables, competition for the best students, vouchers, and compulsory competitive tendering. The second, the exogenous form, involved privatisation of services to schools including a 600 million pound per annum Teacher Supply business, back office, ICT and Technical support to schools (Ball, 2008).

As well as marketisation in education there has been the international growth in new managerialism emerging within institutions of government, business and education. This latter impetus has seen technical measurement of organisational efficiency come to the fore and resulted in an audit and accountability culture (Connell, 2009). In teaching, this

has given rise to school and teacher effectiveness and testing regimes which have resulted in the publishing of school 'league' tables.

In New Zealand the particular form taken by the neoliberal education agenda has involved such a focus on a managerialist approach to teacher quality through compulsory 'performance management' systems, attempts to impose performance pay, imposition of attestation for salary increments through professional standards in industrial agreements, and a range of other 'accountability' mechanisms, New Zealand's 'self-managing' schools, in place since the 1990s, have reached high levels of local autonomy and little or no bureaucratic support (Alison, Cross & Willetts, 2009).

Under a neoliberal ideology the conception of the public good of education has been usurped by the notion of its private benefit (Apple 1996). There has been an accompanying shift from a valuing of equality in education to a pre-eminence of the notion of 'choice' and an ensuing development of competition. These two interdependent ideological shifts have furthered the environment for a number of markets in education – some of which are increasingly global in nature. The introduction of markets runs counter to the move towards the democratisation of education which gathered momentum throughout the twentieth century (Connell, 2009) and this trend can be seen in Australia.

Walford (1992) argued that the main purpose of moves towards greater choice in education has been ideological, aimed at putting an end to egalitarianism and building a differentiated system which is based on competition. Under such a system greater wealth corresponds with greater choice. In the Australian context, this view accords with Connell (2009) who saw the current neoliberal shift as reducing equity and dismantling democracy.

### ***Back to the future: Developments in Australia under Prime Minister Howard***

In Australia, the neoliberal ideological shift has been accompanied by an assertion of falling teacher quality, poor student outcomes and a lack of rigour in curriculum standards and these have been used as justification for greater accountability for schools (Durbridge, 2008). Whilst it is true that for some years student teachers were recruited from the lower deciles of Australian students following a decline in the popularity of teaching as a career, this was not helped by 11 years of conservative government which redirected funding disproportionately from higher education – including teacher education - to the private school sector (Durbridge, 2008).

As well as providing increased funding for private schooling, the Howard Liberal (conservative) Government developed a national school system under greater control of the Federal Government and which incorporated market-based measures to promote choice and competition. Cobbold (2007) attacked the Government's assertions and argued; first, that the Government had manufactured a crisis in Australian, when only Finland's 15 year old students performed on average significantly better than Australia's on PISA tests yet supposed poor performance of Australian students. Second, that the fundamental premise behind Howard's call for greater competition and choice was that it would improve student outcomes and there was no evidence to support this. Third, that

there was no evidence to support Howard's claim that improved funding of private schools would allow schools to reduce fees and provide poorer families with greater choice. In fact, history showed that far from reducing fees most private schools increased their fees in excess of the rate of inflation.

As indicated above, the development of markets in education has been a hallmark of neoliberal reform. One important market in Australian education has been the private schools. Once the preserve of mainly religiously devout and elite families, private schooling has become a widely consumed commodity in Australian life. This is fuelled by parental anxiety and insecurity as well as an increasingly more affluent middle class. Marginson (1997a) reasoned that parental choice of schools undermines the value of an egalitarian education because in choosing 'the best' for their own children such parents necessarily relegate 'the rest' to what they perceive as second best.

In a similar vein, Reid (1999) argued that a system of schools catering for specific homogeneous groups within society is a threat to democracy. Diversity within the public system is crucial, Reid held, for building a healthy 'public' as a civil entity. Viewed in this way, public schools are where the 'common good' is fashioned.

### ***Change of Government means no change to funding arrangements***

The Rudd Government came to power promising an 'Education Revolution'. For public education it offered the promise of redressing eleven years of underfunding and chronic and systematic neglect of public education and training by the Howard Government (Devereaux, 2008). Rudd and Labor had criticised both the Liberal's approach to education and the wider neoliberal agenda (Rudd, 2007). Determined to attain government, and faced with a powerful private school lobby set on ensuring that lavish government subsidies for wealthy schools remain in place, Rudd/Gillard made the solid promise of no change to existing funding arrangements.

What we've said is we're keeping the current formula," ... "That was our commitment and we'll be sticking to it. We wanted to give schools certainty and we've given them certainty with that commitment. (Gillard, *The Australian*, 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2008)

## **Continuation of the Neoliberal Agenda**

### ***School Funding***

Rudd and Labor have been in government for more than two years now and have kept their election promises of maintained funding for private schools and school reporting and, in doing so, remained faithful to the neoliberal agenda for education. The ALP's 2007 election platform contained an explicit commitment to give priority for public schools through enhanced Commonwealth programs. Party leader Kevin Rudd acknowledged that the Commonwealth has a primary obligation to adequately and appropriately fund public schools. Yet despite the Rudd Government's talk about more equitable funding for schools, they have remained resolute in government about their

election promises to maintain the discredited and inequitable ‘SES’ funding mechanisms, established by the Howard Government in 2001 and in place until 2013.

The SES model was based on the socio-economic background of a school’s students. This was supposed to provide an estimate of the capacity of the school community to pay. Student addresses at each school are coded to an Australian Bureau of Statistics census collection district (CCD) and each school’s community is assigned a value in terms of the CCDs from which it draws its students and the percentage of students from each CCD. Cobold (2007) explained that a school’s SES scores are calculated as a weighted average of what are called “dimension scores” for the school’s Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Collection Districts (CCDs). Dimension scores are estimated independently for education, income and occupation on data on these dimensions drawn from the census for each CCD. The dimension scores are combined to produce a score based on the SES index for each CCD. The fact that some private schools have students from the wealthiest families in otherwise poor districts is not taken into account in the SES model.

As well as falling short of being truly needs-based at the outset, an internal government review of the SES funding arrangements for non-government schools in 2008 exposed that the majority of private schools are funded above what would be their SES funding entitlement according to their actual SES scores. Over the 4 years up to 2008, \$2 billion had been paid to schools which had their funding maintained at higher levels than they would have received if the formula had been strictly applied. Consequently, if funding of these schools were to continue in this way the private school sector would to gain an additional \$2.7 billion in overpayments over the 4 years from 2008. This means that the nation’s wealthiest schools, having income through fees of up to AUD\$25,000 per annum per student, remain eligible for millions of dollars in government assistance.

Whilst, overall, Australia performs in the top five OECD countries on PISA test results, McGaw (2009) pointed out that on PISA data Australia performs poorly for equity.

Australia stands out in two important respects from some of the other high-performing countries around it. Australia has a considerably higher proportion of students at the highest level (Level 5). It also has a rather larger percentage at Level 1 or below than some of the others. (p.15)

There have been continued and escalating government subsidies for non-government schools whilst government schools have been allowed to languish with funding shortfalls which have likely contributed to the rise in inequity in Australian schooling. In 2008, a report entitled, ‘Reviewing the evidence: Issues in Commonwealth funding of government and non-government schools in the Howard and Rudd years’ (McMorrow, 2008), showed that an immediate injection of AUD\$1.5 billion was needed to restore federal funding of public schools to 1996 levels; the year of the Howard Government’s first attaining office.

In 2009, Rudd delivered record public funded subsidies to Australia’s richest schools (Patty, 2009). The one large concession the Rudd Government has made to public

education has been the record capital investment under the Building the Education Revolution (BER) program. Ironically, this initiative only came about in response to the Global Financial Crisis and as part of a broader economic stimulus package, the Rudd administration provided the largest injection of capital investment in schools in more than 30 years under the Building the Education Revolution (BER) initiative and, for non-government schools, the *Schools Assistance Act 2008*. The Rudd Government has committed to a broad review of the recurrent funding for schools model, should they be re-elected, in their second term of office. The AEU is hopeful that this review will reverse what has until BER been a widening gap between the sectors.

As a result of new indexation arrangements and increased funding for government primary schools under the National Education Agreement (NEA) established by the Ministerial Council for Educational Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), the National Partnerships and the BER initiatives, in 2009–10, for the first time in decades Commonwealth funding for government schools will exceed that for non-government schools, with government schools receiving 57.7 per cent of Commonwealth funding. However, by 2011–12, the balance of funding between the two school sectors is projected to return to usual historical proportions with non-government schools receiving the majority of Commonwealth funding once short-term initiatives such as the BER expire.

### ***The Accountability Agenda***

Rather than seeking solutions by discussion and negotiation with the Australian teaching profession, Federal Minister for Education Julia Gillard has looked overseas - to Joel Klein and the New York model of school improvement with its “charter” schools and teacher performance pay approaches – to assist in the Government’s Education Revolution, despite the model being widely discredited. Klein has argued strongly that schools should be run more like businesses, and has been enthusiastic in the promotion of “charter” schools, some of which have become profit making enterprises. Klein stated, “We’re converting the role of the principal into a CEO role” (Beder, 2008).

Gillard had vowed to introduce a comprehensive system of school reporting and accountability focusing on literacy and numeracy results; however, after a two-day conference with 150 principals her view was ameliorated at least to some extent.

We will have the My School website around the start of next year [but] a conversation will be had more fully about what else we should have on the website. (*The Age*, November 16<sup>th</sup> 2009)

Local school management in Australia, which had its inception in the 1980s (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988), has recently been linked with changes in employment relationships that attempt to link pay with external, standardised outcomes. There is also a push towards greater principal autonomy and in the Australian state of Victoria local school hiring and firing of staff. This devolution of such responsibilities to school level combined with

greater accountability requirements has intensified work in schools (Gardner & Williamson, 2004)

The Leigh-Ryan (Leigh,2006; Leigh & Ryan,2008; Leigh & Ryan,2009) papers have been used by proponents of the neoliberal agenda to support claims for forms of performance-based pay for teachers. In the state of Victoria two such schemes currently are being trialled. Both schemes are based on literacy and numeracy score improvements. The School Rewards model, to be trialled in up to 50 schools, has schools in competition with each other so that the top 20% of schools receive a 7.5% bonus on teacher salaries. There is no indication of whether or not they have to pay this in part or whole to the teachers though. Under the Teacher Rewards model to be trialled in 25 schools, teachers are in competition with each other. This model involves the principal (and school leadership team), identifying the 'top' 30 percent of teachers who get a bonus of approximately \$5000 per teacher - if they receive the maximum amount available (DoE Victoria, 2009). Funding for these trials is being provided through a project entitled, 'Smarter Schools – Quality Teaching' which is a National Partnership with the Commonwealth Government. States are required to enter into these 'partnerships' in order to access certain Federal education funds. The argument is that teachers and schools in competition with each other will lift standards, one of the aspects imported from the Klein – New York model.

There is also neoliberal governance of teaching itself. Market-oriented neoliberalism is profoundly suspicious of the professions which it views as anti-competitive monopolies (Connell, 2009). 'Teaching Australia' was an organisation established by the Howard Government for the express purpose of controlling the profession and denying the teacher unions a professional voice.

Connell argued that under neoliberalism the distrust of teachers has led to requirements by teacher registration authorities to make teacher competencies into auditable lists of standards indicators. Such procedures have the potential to be dismissed as frivolous, as is evidenced by a requirement of the Tasmanian Teacher Registration Board's graduate standard B.3, indicator 4, which states: "Develop a calm and approachable demeanour". Irrespective of whether this is always a desirable trait for teachers to display, it would seem difficult to reach agreement on what it means to reach a required standard under this indicator.

Neoliberalism seeks to deprofessionalise teaching. A recent Australian Government initiative aimed at 'raising teaching standards' is known as Teach for Australia. Based on overseas models of 'Teach First' and 'Teach for America', this Australian scheme is set to fast track top graduates from other disciplines into teaching with minimal teacher training. Teacher unions, academics, and professional bodies remain in firm opposition to this approach and despite a lack of evidence to show the success of such programs elsewhere the Government has continued with it. The message from the 'Teach for Australia' initiative is that teaching does not involve any particularly specialised skills and a bright graduate from any other field should be able to do it with minimal training.



The Rudd/Gillard Federal Government has furthered moves towards a national curriculum and imposed a National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing regime on schools. The National Curriculum, aimed at greater consistency across state education jurisdictions, will also operate to control them. One of the perceived benefits of NAPLAN testing is that, in a more unified system, usefully comparable data may be generated to enable governments to target funding to areas of greatest need in a system which currently does not fund well for equity. The negative, unintended consequence of NAPLAN (even prior to the commencement of the My School website) is that the data were already being used by media outlets to publish league tables of school performance and the consequent pressure on schools may result in 'teaching to the test' and a narrowing of the curriculum. Already there has been a set of instructions for teachers in Victoria for how to teach to the test. In Tasmania, Australia's smallest and most socioeconomically disadvantaged state which does not currently lead the states on mean literacy or numeracy test results, there is emerging evidence that its students tend to perform well on the stepped problem solving items in the numeracy testing package. Paradoxically, pressure to conform to a National Curriculum and to improve Tasmania's relative position on global test results may in fact lead to a 'dumbing down' of teaching practice and a reduction in teaching the higher level skills, which are associated with stepped problem solving. The experience of national testing in Britain is reported as having narrowed the curriculum. The former head of Britain's Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Dr Ken Boston, has said England's national curriculum has been narrowed by focusing on "high stakes" testing shaping league table results (Australian Teacher, 2009).

The adoption of 'new public management' (NPM) has been public sector-wide. The notion of NPM is characterised by aspects such as increased competition, local level management, a reduction in the government's role in service provision, downsizing and decentralising the public sector, deregulation of the labour market, the imposition of the strongest feasible framework of competition and accountability on public sector activity, explicit standards and measures of performance, clear definition of targets and indicators of success, a greater emphasis on output control - a stress on results and not processes, moves to new forms of corporate governance, a shift from public funding to private sector provision (the privatisation agenda), and a reduction in the self-regulating powers of the professions (Ferlie et al., 1996 cited in Dempster, 2002a, p. 17). Examples of all of these aspects of NPM can be seen in Australian government schools and are consistent with neoliberal aspects of competition, privatisation and accountability. Recent Tasmanian government policy of downsizing the public service through job vacancy control measures and attempts to break down the structure of the Department of Education through the establishment of federations of schools are examples of this policy in practice.

### ***Intellectual battleground***

Economists Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan from the Australian National University prepared for the Federal Government a paper entitled *How and Why has Teacher Quality Changed in Australia?* The data presented as tenuous evidence for a decline of teacher quality over more than 40 years came from six Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

(LSAY). The LSAY studies in fact came to vastly different conclusions than Leigh and Ryan. Many caveats surround the claim, yet the Howard Government used it as an argument for a system of “merit” pay for teachers based on student results (Job, 2009).

Declining teacher effectiveness formed the topic of another of Leigh’s papers (Leigh, 2009), which was again a result of work commissioned by the Federal Government and used to further the case under Labor for the introduction of “performance-based” pay for teachers. Leigh used data from one Australian state, Queensland, year three, five and seven literacy and numeracy tests to track individual student’s performances through their schooling. Year three students’ test results were used as the base and he focused on the extent to which performance on subsequent tests improved relative to the “average” performance of the student’s cohort. Matching students with their teachers they had at each year level, he then assigned the change in relative performance (or lack of thereof) to the effects of teaching and the specific teachers each student had (Job, 2009). The limitations of Leigh’s research include the defining of teacher effectiveness in terms of student performance on specific literacy and numeracy tests which is a relatively limited and crude measure (Job, 2009) and the time (August after two school years) at which the tests were administered meaning that each student had experienced three teachers in that period (Job, 2009).

A third report by Leigh, released in February, 2008, attempted to map a change in “school productivity” in Australia. Employing a business “productivity” model to study educational outcomes, the report made a range of claims for a small but statistically significant fall in learning outcomes during a period (1964 to 2003) when per child expenditure on education had increased by 258 per cent. Leigh held that factors such as societal and demographic changes were not sufficient to explain these changes.

Together these three contentious reports, which have remained largely unquestioned by the Australian media, commentators, and academics, reinforce the current Rudd/Gillard Government’s ideological position of falling teacher quality and poor student outcomes and a lack of rigour in education.

### ***The Role of the AEU in challenging the agenda***

The Australian Education Union (AEU), 175 000 member strong, has been the key voice defending the importance of public education. At state branch level, the AEU works in alliance with other pro public education organisations. In the state of New South Wales, for example, the Public Education Alliance consists of the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, Secondary School Principals Council, NSW Primary Principals Association, Public Schools Principals Forum and NSW Federation of School Community Organisations and the New South Wales Teachers’ Teachers Federation (the largest state associated body of the AEU). The Public Education Alliance has organised some major events to highlight the importance of public schooling including the Cornerstones Conference in September 2006 and an Education Summit in response to the Federal Government’s 2008 “*Australia 2020 Summit*” at which public education received little direct attention and was lumped in with the “productivity” part of the agenda (Australian Government, 2008).

The AEU Federal campaign in defence of public schools has been developed on a number of fronts; these include lobbying governments to introduce “needs-based” higher equity education funding and the call for the banning of the publishing of simplistic league tables of school test performance.

The call from the AEU is for the Federal Government to honour its 2007 election promise platform and uphold the policy position held by former Federal Labor Governments to give priority to the funding of public schools (AEU, 2009). The promised review of funding will no doubt result in a funding model which remains in place for many years to come, so the AEU is concerned that its voice is heard amid claims that notions of a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ schools are passé and no longer applicable in the current Australian economic and educational contexts. Greater hybridization and joint public-private ventures are the likely outcomes in the future if the call for the defence of public education as a discrete and valued entity are not heard and heeded.

In May 2009 the Hobart Mercury became the first major Australian daily newspaper to publish a simplistic “league table” which ranked the performance of Tasmanian high schools in literacy, numeracy and student attendance. Calls for banning such publications have been made from a wide range of education stakeholders, including parent organisations (of both state and Catholic schools), school principals, teacher professional associations and education academics, at both state and federal levels.

Nationally, the AEU has vowed to place a ban on its teachers conducting the NAPLAN testing once the My School website publishes comparable data on school test results. Such a ban may be challenged under federal industrial laws that have recently been amended by Rudd and Gillard (who is also Minister for Workplace Relations).

### ***AEU Tasmanian Branch Lobbying***

This year, 2010, is both a federal and state election year. At state level, the AEU has requested policy from the three major Tasmanian political parties (Labor, Liberal and Greens) to ban the publishing of school performance league tables and to introduce a truly needs-based funding model for schools. To date, only the smallest party, the Greens, have committed to this policy. The others agree that publication of such tables is deplorable and serves no useful purpose yet have refused to legislate against them. These major parties cite their libertarian standpoints on “freedom of the press” as central to this policy position. The AEU continues to point out the contradiction between deploring such a practice and yet refusing to act to prevent it. It is likely, in the current political climate and with Tasmania’s Hare-Clarke voting system that whom-ever governs following the election will do so only through minority government, i.e., co-operation with the Greens. Teachers, whose opinions in many communities still hold authority and among who on AEU estimates there is a high proportion of swinging voters, may well make a difference at the polls.

In Tasmania, the annual education budget exceeds one billion dollars and a little more than \$40 million of this goes from state coffers to non-government schools. The AEU has

asked the political parties to opt for a truly needs-based model of funding whereby all schools would have to make public the full extent of their private funding resources. Only the Greens are have indicated support for of this policy initiative.

### ***Where to now?***

The privatisation/marketisation of schools requires opposition across a broad front. When parent organisations and unions as well as school principals and teacher professional associations recognise that markets in education do not bring educational prosperity for all, and when these groups speak with a single voice, then governments will be forced to reconsider their approaches.

The accountability/managerial side of the neoliberal agenda is closely connected with marketisation and is fuelled in the public domain by panic about failing standards and the knee-jerk promises by governments to ‘fix’ what is ‘wrong’ in education. Blaming teachers for failing a system which is under-resourced and fails to value their work will not bring about improvements (Durbridge, 2008). Developing school communities through shared goals and partnerships and greater trust may be of greater benefit.

There are a number of Australian state elections and a federal election in 2010. In November 2009 the Our Island Our Voices campaign commissioned independent polling by Tasmanian research company EMRS into the issues that are important to Tasmanians in the March 2010 State Election. In this poll education was seen by 36 per cent of voters as a key election issue, followed by health on 25 per cent (TasCOSS, 2009).

There is a level of public consensus about the importance of education and what is required now is successful campaigning to ensure that voters hold political parties to commit to proper resourcing of their schools.

In the neoliberal era, the view of what makes a good teacher has become more prescriptive and narrow and also outside the control of teachers themselves. Teachers will need to be united through their union if they are to regain some professional self determination and not be further devalued and degraded to the role of technicians.

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