

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING AUTHORITY BILL 2008

Second Reading

[Mr ROBERT](#) (Fadden) (11.10 a.m.)—I note with interest that the Deputy Prime Minister, when she introduced the [Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Bill 2008](#) in her second reading speech, said:

This bill is yet another illustration of how this government is getting on with the job of delivering an education revolution to Australia.

I suggest this education revolution might as well be dashed on the Bay of Pigs for all that it will achieve for the nation. When looking forward we must look back at where we have come from before discussing education going forward. Look at what the coalition achieved. It increased funding for state schools in every budget, delivering a funding increase of 70 per cent in real terms between 1996 and 2007. It put the interests of children and parents ahead of bureaucrats and teachers unions. It enhanced the capacity of parents to choose between public and private schools. It established better formulas for schools to get funding from the federal government. It ended the Keating government's new schools policy, which placed severe restrictions on establishing new non-government schools. I guess Labor does not like private education. The coalition also attached conditions to Commonwealth education funding to the states, which enabled the introduction of literacy and numeracy tests for all students, and testing trials were also introduced for year 9 students in 2007.

Labor promised an education revolution. Interestingly, it has also promised 11 wars on everything from unemployment to food and fuel this year. There is something about war and revolution that a Marxist based party seems to enjoy. Labor promised to deliver an education revolution that would increase productivity and provide better outcomes for all children. Yet the Prime Minister's education revolution is unfortunately creating losers as well as winners, particularly in private schools, where Labor has cut funding by abandoning the coalition's \$1.2 billion Investing in Our Schools Program. I was recently at the Coombabah State School where the headmaster lauded the Investing in Our Schools Program for giving much needed funds to put in place the infrastructure that the state was not providing—in this case, a range of dongas that were used for students to learn in, because the state would not provide established classrooms. The Investing in Our Schools Program also provided the funds, the means and the capability to provide internet connectivity in those classrooms.

Labor says it will divert almost all of the \$1.2 billion from the Investing in Our Schools Program into trade training centres and of course that huge failure of a white elephant, the computers in our schools program, yet these programs benefit secondary schools only. Only \$800,000 goes to primary schools, who clearly are the biggest losers. Despite the claim of an education revolution, in its first budget Labor cut almost \$400 million in specific programs targeted at improving standards in literacy and numeracy. The \$700 Even Start tuition vouchers for students who failed to meet minimum standards have been scrapped. The \$70 million summer school program has been scrapped. The \$50,000 in rewards for schools that improve literacy and numeracy has been scrapped. Far from bringing an education revolution, Labor has increased spending on education by less than one per cent. Cracker of a revolution, boys—well done! Labor has simply replaced successful and very popular Howard government programs with new bureaucracies delivering the failed computers in schools and trade training centres programs.

Let us look at our computers in schools as we are discussing the wide range of education. The Prime Minister, at the ALP campaign launch, said:

... Labor will undertake a groundbreaking reform by providing for every Australian secondary school student in Years 9 to 12 access to their own computer at school.

So how has Mr Rudd gone on this central education policy that is primary to the education revolution? He has abandoned the promise to provide every year 9 to year 12 student with access to their own computer at school. Now they will have access to a computer for every two students. Less than 10 per cent of public schools have benefited from the program; less than 10 per cent of the total computers have been delivered. Yet we are a third of the way through the government's term. State and federal governments are yet to agree on who pays the something like \$3 billion for installing and maintaining computers, software, networking and all of the ancillary air conditioning and infrastructure that go with it. By not meeting these costs, the Prime Minister is providing only 20 to 25 per cent of the funds needed to pay for his election promise, insisting that parents pick up the rest. A fabulous revolution, I say! Round 2 of the computer program closed on 9 October this year, with 1,900 schools invited to apply. Many schools indicated that they will not be applying, and it appears that the New South Wales government, that great pinnacle of democracy, has instructed its schools not to apply. A fabulous revolution! You can be truly proud of that great revolution and where it is going!

Labor promised not to alter the Howard government's SES funding model in the 2009 to 2012 funding period, yet the Schools Assistance Bill currently before the Senate inquiry gives extra powers to a minister to stop or delay government funding for a range of what can only be construed as spurious reasons. It mandates that schools comply strictly with a national curriculum, putting funding to Steiner, Montessori, special needs, faith based and International Baccalaureate schools under some degree of threat. It introduces new disclosure requirements that will discourage fundraising. Currently, all external sources of revenue that a school raises are disclosed to the minister but not to the general public. Labor has now changed the bill to say that they must all be disclosed to the public. Why? What interest do I have in what the fundraising regimes of a private school in Tasmania are? The answer is none. But I have asked the wrong question. As I look at the former secretary of the ACTU across the table, the question should be, 'What interest does the teachers union have in getting information about fundraising and sources of funding for private schools?' Labor has announced plans to review school funding in 2010. On the evidence, it appears clear that they intend to return to the politics of envy and class warfare and to the policy of Mark Latham's private school hit list. Why? Perhaps Labor does not like private schools.

Let us move on to Labor's trade training centres. It promised new trade centres built in all of Australia's 2,650 secondary schools, part of its 2007 election policy. The reality is that, because the funding is only \$900,000 to each school on average, schools are forced to pool their funds to build something that resembles a trade training centre. In the first round, just 34 projects were successful.

If we move into the higher education space, the coalition increased funding to the higher education sector from \$4.2 billion in 1995-96 to \$6.7 billion in the 2007-08 year, a 13 per cent increase in real terms. It increased the higher education loan repayment threshold. Additional funding for universities was provided. There were new loan schemes and boosted funding for regional campuses. It presided over a 58 per cent increase in the number of students. Thankfully, it introduced voluntary student unionism and established the \$6 billion Higher Education Endowment Fund.

Now let us look at what Labor promised with respect to voluntary student unionism. The current Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, said at a doorstep:

I'm not considering a compulsory HECS-style arrangement and the whole basis of the approach is one of a voluntary approach so I'm not contemplating a compulsory amenities fee.

That is what he said—a senior member of the Labor cabinet and frontbench. The Deputy Prime Minister said in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 11 August:

We committed before the election that we would not reintroduce compulsory student unionism.

Those are two definitive statements that are unequivocal: there will be no compulsory amenity fee and there will be no compulsory student unionism. But let us look at the facts, because they are always a little bit more telling than the rhetoric. The government announced on 3 November this year that it would introduce a \$250 service fee for Australian university students to be compulsorily paid by a deferred HECS-style arrangement. That is the height of duplicity. The Deputy Prime Minister and the current foreign minister were both unequivocal in their statements that they would not introduce compulsory fees, and here they are. Indeed, the Deputy Prime Minister, only three months earlier, said, 'We committed that we would not introduce compulsory student unionism,' and three months later—less than 100 days later—there it is: a compulsory fee. It is a betrayal. It is looking the Australian people in the eye, saying one thing and blatantly doing another. I guess that was not in Labor's 70-page glossy brochure paid for by taxpayers' dollars to celebrate the first 12 months of the failed Labor Rudd government.

So that is the past; that is where we have come from. We have come from duplicity, broken promises and farce. Let us have a look at where we are going. The current bill is establishing a new Commonwealth body, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, ACARA, to develop and implement the new national curriculum and to collect data and provide analysis and research to governments. The government had initially committed separate funding to develop a new National Curriculum Board and a new independent National Schools Assessment and Data Centre. This bill aggregates that funding and incorporates both bodies into ACARA.

The development of a national curriculum began under the Howard government and had its obvious support. However, the opposition has expressed reservations about the direction that the curriculum has now taken under a Labor government. Minister Gillard appointed an interim National Curriculum Board to work on its development as this legislation was being prepared, and that board included working groups in each of the four subject areas being covered by the curriculum: mathematics, English, science and history. The development of the history curriculum, in particular, has caused a little concern.

The new authority, ACARA, will assume powers over curriculum and assessment that are currently with state governments and it will further be empowered by its secondary role as the primary data analysis and research centre. ACARA's clearest role, though, is the development of a national curriculum. We support that; we support a national curriculum. It certainly makes sense. We are concerned, though, that, should it be anything other than a useful framework, the national curriculum may be hijacked. We are concerned there is a danger of a national curriculum being taken and straddled with left-wing ideological views.

It would be a disaster for Australian students if the Labor Party and its left-wing friends used the national curriculum as an opportunity to skew and hijack schooling in Australia. We will take the Labor government on its word—which we have done a few times this year, which has only led to catastrophic failure. But we will take them on their word that ACARA will do the right thing and will develop a class curriculum that is free from ideological bias, with a strong foundation in the basics. We will take them on their word that that will be achieved.

We are concerned about any move away from the basics, any move away from literacy and numeracy and any move away from Australian history that incorporates an intelligent balance between our Aboriginal heritage, the history of European settlement and modern Australian history. We are concerned that balance is provided in the curriculum. We will closely monitor the establishment of the curriculum, we will encourage wide consultation and we will not allow perspectives to be captured by a small group of ideologues.

We have seen in the Schools Assistance Bill that the Labor Party wishes to mandate the introduction of the national curriculum before the end of the funding quadrennium in non-government schools as a condition for non-government schools to receive funding from 1 January, even though we have little idea what the national curriculum may actually look like. The Deputy Prime Minister has refused to confirm that schools currently delivering alternative recognised curricula will be able to continue to do so. This makes it very difficult for a range of high-achieving students, special students and those with different educational philosophies to continue, with some faith, going forward. It puts at risk those faith based schools who teach faith based components within their schooling. The Deputy Prime Minister's refusal to provide comfort to these schools by accepting the opposition's amendment to the Schools Assistance Bill to remove the mandatory application of the unwritten national curriculum has certainly not helped matters.

In a speech on 10 November 2008, the Deputy Prime Minister deferred any decision about whether alternative curriculum based schools will be able to continue under ACARA. This means that, under the current government, ACARA will have the final say as to whether the following curricula are allowed: Jewish, Islamic and Christian schools; the unique Steiner schools, of which I have one in my electorate, based in Nerang; the Montessori schools; the University of Cambridge International Examination; and the International Baccalaureate. Government has moved away from its responsibility to provide guidance and support for those curricula and is allowing ACARA to decide if they should continue.

I would contend that, for a national curriculum to succeed, ACARA and the government will need to be able to convince all of the state education departments, all the state governments and the non-government sector that the national curriculum will not interfere in those aspects of the present curriculum of which they are most proud, which differentiate their schooling and which mean that parents know full well what the students are being taught and accept that by virtue of placing their child into a school like Steiner or Montessori. Members may draw their own conclusion as to how the government will be successful in this endeavour. But the opposition will watch carefully and will not allow the national curriculum to be hijacked by left-wing ideologues for their own purpose. We are looking for a balanced curriculum, a curriculum that meets the needs of all Australians. The opposition will hold the government strongly accountable if anything other than that is delivered.