

have to be kept in mind when translating the New Zealand experience to Australia.

First, New Zealand has a unicameral Parliament and in the days of the introduction of a GST had a first-past-the-post voting system. This meant that once the government of the day had decided it wanted to introduce a GST it could do so. It did not have to be concerned about 'getting the numbers' from minor parties, as it did not have to get the legislation through a chamber in which it did not hold the balance of power.

In addition, sub-national authorities in New Zealand play a comparatively very minor role in terms of functions and revenue-raising powers. Because of that, the New Zealand Government was spared the problems that can arise with State governments.

None of this makes reform any less necessary. But it does make it that much harder to achieve. If Australia chooses to go down the New Zealand path, it means more work has to be done in ensuring broad-based support for the change, and effort has to be put into making sure that everyone is prepared to make changes in the national interest.

The New Zealand tax reform process has many lessons from which Australia can learn. It is a demonstration that even something that seems as politically impossible as a broad-based consumption tax coupled with a broad-based income tax can become accepted—even part of conventional wisdom—over time.



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I P A

Used Anglicans

The Australian Education Union and the Anglican Synod Report

KEVIN DONNELLY

It is not only when supping with the Devil that one needs a long spoon

We ask members to wear a blue ribbon as a symbol of public education. It will be an important sign of our resolve to fight for the survival of public education in this country. Let us not lose what has evolved as a quality, free, secular education system. Let the battle begin, we will defend state education against the conservatives and ensure that future generations will have access to a system based on the principles of equality and social justice.

The AEU News,
June 4, 1998, page 9.

THE Australian Education Union (AEU), if nothing else, is quite open and honest about its intentions to overturn recent changes to the Australian school system. The rhetoric is one of 'battle' and words like 'survival', 'fight' and 'defend' make it perfectly clear that, in the war against so-called 'conservatives' and 'economic rationalists', the AEU will do almost anything to win the day.

Since the national conference in Sydney last year, organized by the AEU and from which the above quotation has been taken, the teacher union has implemented a number of strategies to achieve its ends.

The first relates to a marginal-seats campaign undertaken before and during the recent federal election. Obviously, one very effective way to have the union's policies taken up is to have a Labor government in Canberra willing to repay its debt to the union movement. Not only did the union letterbox drop marginal seats, but a series of anti-GST advertisements were also run on evening television.

A second strategy employed by the AEU is to orchestrate public meetings involving fellow travellers and sympathizers. The union, instead of appearing alone—and thereby being seen as self-interested—brings together a collection of 'independent' academics, commentators

and community groups who, as you would expect, argue the union's case.

One such meeting occurred at the Melbourne Town Hall in June 1998. Described as a 'community summit' (*AEU News*, July 9, 1998), the meeting gave special prominence to those opposed to the Government and those guaranteed to promote the union line. Not surprisingly, the Melbourne meeting concluded with the following:

The final outcome of the Summit was a resolution that condemns the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have nots, rejects the concept of economic rationalism and calls for a society that is tolerant and considers community needs.

The AEU News,
July 9, 1998, page 16.

A second meeting, also held in Melbourne, organized to argue what the union defines as the case for public education, occurred on 2 August 1998. Once again, the meeting involved those sympathetic to the union: including pro-Left politicians, trade union representatives and 'friendly' academics. The meeting agreed on a 'Statement of Principles for Public Education' that endorsed the AEU's policy on education.

Supporting publications willing to argue the union's case is a third strategy the AEU is using to further its cause. The publication of *Going Public: Education Policy and Public Education in Australia* by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACES) and the Centre for the Study of Public Education at the University of South Australia, provides a very recent example of this approach.

The book includes essays opposed to recent changes in the school system and very critical of the so-called 'conservative' agenda in areas like accountability and increased parental choice. The benefits of this particular strategy are that the union appears at arm's length from what is writ-

REVIEW

ten, the book has public credibility as it is published by an 'independent' third party and it can be used at a later stage as evidence that all is not well with the public education system.

That the union uses the preceding three strategies to further its cause should not be considered unusual or wrong. We live in a democracy and one of the greatest freedoms we have is the right to organize and to enter the public debate. Given the union's affiliation with the trade union movement, and its consistent support of the ALP during elections, it is also not surprising that the union is a strident critic of conservative governments.

Where there should be cause for concern is when the union, and those who support it, employ respected and independent third parties to argue their case without showing their hand or admitting that what is intended is part of an orchestrated political campaign.

Such is the fourth strategy employed by the AEU and it is evidenced by the publication of *The State of Our State Schools: The Report of the Synod Schools Task Group on Victoria's Public Education System*. The report is the product of a task force established by the Anglican Melbourne Diocesan Synod and it was tabled, amid much controversy, at the October 1998 meeting of the Synod.

If governments and parties are compromised by their involvement in politics, then the Church represents a beacon symbolizing truth and independence. Given such currency, it is understandable why those committed to political solutions would be very happy if the Church advocated their particular case. Of course, such support should not be too obvious or easily identified.

The report of the Anglican Task Group is, on the surface, an independent and balanced evaluation of the state of Victorian State schools. It traces the history of secular education in that State, describes a number of models that have influenced its development and provides a critique of recent changes.

The recommendations at the end of the report present a series of innocuous statements that, amongst other things, seek ongoing support for public education, the need for government to increase expenditure and agreement that the report be commended to parishes for 'study and action'.

Notwithstanding the above, a closer reading of the report reveals that it is very much a political document written so as to endorse and support the AEU's public campaign and to condemn the conservative agenda in education.

Evidence that the report is not independent can be found on examining the names of those involved in its production. Ann Morrow, a member of the Task Group, is also a prominent member of the group established by the AEU in late 1997 to defend public education. Not only has she taken a key part in the meetings described earlier in this article but, under the previous ALP government, she was a close confidante of the then Minister for Education, Joan Kirner.

One of those responsible for carrying the research for the report, Michaela Kronemann, is currently Research Officer for the Victorian Branch of the AEU. Ms Kronemann has also been involved in the public meetings orchestrated by the AEU and, as one would suspect, is a strong advocate of the union line.

Further evidence of the lack of independence in the report is the way it uncritically mirrors union policy on a number of important issues. One of the union's key policies involves restoring the New Schools Policy and abolishing the Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) mechanism—the effect of these Howard Government initiatives has been to make it easier to establish non-government schools and to penalize government education systems financially if they lose market share.

While one might expect that a Task Group representing the Anglican Church, and Anglican schools, would be a staunch defender of the non-government school system, such is not the case. Not only does the Task Group's recommendations adopt the union's stance about the New Schools Policy and the EBA but, in the body of the report, those parents who send their children to Anglican schools are criticized for undermining the government system and for worshipping money (pages 6–7).

The rhetoric and arguments used in the Task Group's report also mirror those of the AEU. The report argues that governments around Australia, by making schools more accountable and allowing parental choice, are simply concerned with increasing the power of the privileged and leaving the less well off with 'a residual low-cost government sector targeted to low income groups'.

Referring to what it terms the 'marketisation of education', the report also argues that recent changes have 'the potential to destroy the system itself'. Not only is the school system under threat, but the report goes even further and states that the very fabric of society itself is at risk: 'in the name of free enterprise, social solidarity is being suppressed and inequalities normalised'.

Finally, much of the statistical information in the report about class sizes, student/teacher ratios, education budgets and resourcing schools uncritically accepts much of what the AEU has argued over the last 12 months.

Like the union, the Task Group fails to mention that the base line used to compare education spending in Victoria—spending for the years 1989–92—was not financially viable. Also ignored is the fact that a succession of Labor education ministers had to seek substantial additional funding from the Treasury in those years to meet costs which had been incurred in excess of approved parliamentary appropriations.

The report also fails to mention the substantial real increase in education expenditure since 1991–92—including an increase in funding for students with disabilities from \$199m in 1992 to \$250m in 1998—and the fact that parent and teacher surveys carried out by schools show a high level of satisfaction with the state of State education.

In the weeks leading up to the Report being tabled at the Synod meeting, it suffered a good deal of media criticism. Notwithstanding the very positive description of the Report in the teacher union's newsletter ('Anglicans blast education cuts' *AEU News*, 1 October 1998), a number of articles and reports in Melbourne's daily papers criticized the Report for being one-sided and factually incorrect.

Such was the flawed nature of the Task Group's Report, that, when it finally came to the Synod vote, it was only accepted by a handful of votes—219 voted in favour, 212 against with about 150 abstaining.



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