

Australia: Victorian Labor government reneges on its education promises

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After only three months in office the recently elected Bracks Labor government in the Australian state of Victoria is already reneging on its promises to ameliorate the crisis in the state's public education system.

In last year's election campaign, the Labor Party (ALP) targeted the massive education cuts carried out by the Kennett Liberal government. Labor leader Steve Bracks allocated the education portfolio to Mary Delahunty, one of the ALP's newly recruited "A-list" of well-known personalities. According to the Melbourne *Age* newspaper, the former television journalist "represented the party's biggest signing in its attempt to have a realistic chance at the next election".

As shadow education minister, Delahunty boasted that, if elected, Labor would end the system of contract teaching introduced by the Kennett government in 1993. Contract teachers currently make up 18 percent of the state's staff. These 6,000 teachers are in an invidious situation. Their contracts can be as brief as one month, but are usually for a year. Not only do they face the declining standards and resources of the past decade, but they must also repeatedly reapply for their jobs and are paid \$10,000-15,000 less annually than permanent teachers.

Apart from saving the government money, this has created a workforce that is more pliant due to the precarious nature of its employment. Contract teaching has helped undermine public schools as young teachers—and their students—have no continuity. This has been a factor in pushing both students and teachers into the private system.

Just prior to the Christmas break, with Labor in office, Education Minister Delahunty issued a letter to school principals saying: "I consider it important that teachers be employed on an ongoing basis where this is

possible within the school's workforce requirements. It is recognised, however, that there will still be a need for a small number of fixed-term positions." Her letter continued: "In implementing this commitment it is important that the school's workforce planning balances both the needs of staff and the longer term needs of the school."

The cruel hoax is twofold. First, the "small number of fixed-term positions" amounts to about two-thirds of the contract positions. At least 3,670, or 11 percent of teachers will remain on short-term contracts. Secondly, asking principals to balance the "longer term needs of the school" against the needs of staff means balancing the economic viability of programs, courses, the employment of teacher aides and the general running of the school against employing permanent teachers. Only a tiny minority of schools in more affluent areas will be able to finance full permanency.

Before the election, Delahunty made even greater noise about Labor's commitment to free speech. She pledged to lift all the gagging rules imposed on teachers, notably Teaching Service Order 140 (TSO 140), introduced by Kennett in 1993.

A state Supreme Court case last November, brought by sacked teacher Geraldine Rawson—one of TSO 140's victims—against the Minister and Department of Education, showed the Bracks government's real attitude.

Only two days prior to Rawson's challenge to the legality and constitutionality of TSO 140, Delahunty, with breathtaking hypocrisy, repealed one clause of the regulation. "It is with great pleasure that the government is lifting the gag," she declared. "I have requested the Department of Education to inform all teachers, principals and schools that the gag has been lifted, in the same way that the previous government

informed them that the gag had been applied—by fax ... I signed an amendment to Teaching Service Order 165, formerly the odious Teaching Service Order 140. By doing so I repealed clause 3.12, which prohibited public comment by teachers.”

Delahunty did not mention the fact that she was retaining two other gagging provisions and continuing the court proceedings against Rawson. The judge hearing her case, Justice Mandie, ultimately ruled Clause 3.7 of TSO 140 to be invalid as “a sweeping prohibition”. But the Labor government's lawyers had fought to retain Clause 3.7 and another gagging clause, 4.19, insisting that teachers had no right to speak publicly about the situation inside schools without official permission. Labor's barrister referred to the government's relationship to teachers as one of “master and servant”.

Labor also promised to spend \$50 million to lower class sizes in primary schools. “Reduced class sizes, particularly in the early years of schooling, will be a central part of Labor's plan to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes,” it said. “During our first four years in government, Labor will cut class sizes for Preparatory, Year 1 and Year 2 to 21 or less.” In other words, the maximum class size would be 21.

When Access Economics audited Labor's budget, however, the financial consultants firm revealed that Labor's figures only allowed for an *average* of 21 students and that not all classes could be run on that basis.

In addition, the ALP vowed to “provide all school communities with the resources that produce excellence”. To this end, it pledged additional spending of \$510 million over four years.

But these figures include \$72.5 million in extra spending on private schools and \$120 million diverted from “wasteful advertising”. When these amounts are excluded, the actual increase in spending on government education over the next four years is \$318 million. This adds merely \$80 million a year to the Kennett government's education budget of \$5.5 billion—a rise of less than 1.5 percent.

Melbourne *Age* columnist Kenneth Davidson drew a comparison with the neighbouring state of New South Wales. “If Victorian education spending was to be restored to a comparable level to NSW's [as it was up until 1993-94 when the Kennett government attack on

government school education spending began], Victoria would have to be spending some \$470 million more than it was in 1997-98. In round terms, to bring education spending in Victoria back to the level in NSW in 2000 would require the expenditure of about half a billion dollars. And all this money would need to be spent on public education.”

This comparison only underscores the enormity of the social reversal that has taken place in Victoria. Education budgets have been cut dramatically in all Australian states, including NSW, over the past decade.

To win office, the Labor politicians resorted to crass populism. Bracks claimed that every Labor policy was about answering “the call from our neglected streets—our neglected suburbs and towns”. But in government such claims cannot be reconciled with Bracks' election pledge to business: “I have a financial management plan that is the toughest in the nation”.

Thousands of parents and teachers expected that the newly elected Labor government might at least partially redress the damage done to the education system. They are beginning to see that their hopes were misplaced.

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