

Australia: Labor government accelerates right-wing offensive against public education

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In a major speech delivered on Wednesday to the National Press Club, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd unveiled a series of far reaching right-wing reforms to the public education system. The proposed measures include the publication of national league tables based on schools' test results, tying school funding to these test results, shutting down schools deemed "underperforming", introducing so-called performance pay for teachers, and bringing university graduates without teaching qualifications into the public school system. The central aim of this "education revolution" is to better meet business demands for a more productive workforce.

The Labor government is now advancing an agenda that the former Howard government first proposed in 2004, but proved unable to implement. Public education is to be entirely transformed. Schools that avoid closure or amalgamation will function as a second-rate safety net for those children whose parents are unable to afford private schooling. With the exception of a small number of "show case" schools, public institutions will remain grossly underfunded, ill-equipped to deal with students' complex educational and social needs, and solely oriented towards equipping young people with the immediate work skills required by corporate Australia.

Beginning next year, the Labor government will make federal funding conditional on the states agreeing to implement "individual school performance reporting". In his Press Club speech, Rudd presented this as a means of increasing "transparency" for the benefit of parents and the community. In reality, however, the purpose is to create a mechanism through which the allocation of school funding, level of teacher pay, and viability of individual schools can be determined on the basis of "student outcomes". Underlying this approach is an essentially punitive conception of school performance.

"Where, despite best efforts, schools are not lifting their performance, the Commonwealth expects education authorities to take serious action—such as replacing the school principal, replacing senior staff, reorganising the school or even merging that school with other more effective schools," Rudd declared. "Tough action is necessary if we are to achieve real change. And it's tough action that our reform payments will reward."

The prime minister also announced his intention to follow the "Teach for America" and British "Teach First" programs—"where highly talented graduates are given an accelerated pathway into teaching, placed into the most challenging school environments and paid at a higher rate". In addition, these teachers will "also receive mentoring and support from leading businesses and an option of employment after they complete their initial teaching assignment should they choose to leave".

As an incentive to facilitate the states' implementation of these measures, the Rudd government has proposed limited funding increases of around \$500,000 per average-sized school. This sum is a mere drop in the ocean; half a million dollars will not even begin to fund the required investment in public schools throughout the country. Many lack the most basic resources and adequate classrooms, let alone appropriate computer

and information technology.

A study into national public and private school funding, commissioned by the Australian Education Union and conducted by the University of Sydney's Dr. Jim McMorro and released this week found that the share of federal school spending going to the public system declined under the former Howard government from 43 percent in 1996 to 35 percent in 2007. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Total increases for non-government schools have amounted to \$3.8 billion in real terms over 10 years from 1996, compared with \$1.4 billion for government schools, which serve twice as many students."

Labor is now set to accelerate this deliberate degradation of the public system. The government has maintained Howard's funding model, under which enormous sums of public money have been poured into private schools, including the wealthiest elite institutions. Dr. McMorro calculated that federal funding to public schools will further decline to just 33.8 percent of all school funding by 2012, under conditions where at least an additional \$1.5 billion is needed just to restore public school funding to 1996 levels.

Labor implements reactionary agenda

In a notable exchange following Rudd's National Press Club address, one journalist asked: "How is it an education revolution when you're following Coalition policies to threaten the states' and territories' education funding unless they introduce performance pay, principal autonomy, school comparisons, not to mention the fact that you're following the Coalition policy to dock welfare payments to truanting families? I mean, it's hardly original, let alone revolutionary." Rudd replied: "Well what would be revolutionary is for someone to actually do this, as opposed to just talk about it... In fact doing something is quite a different challenge, and I just think we as a national government have got a responsibility to act."

Both Rudd and education minister Julia Gillard later boasted that while the Howard government received 24 different reports into the education system, only Labor would prove capable of implementing the "reform" agenda.

The *Australian* editorial on Thursday expressed its approval: "Mr Rudd's predecessor, John Howard, talked a good game on education and supported parents' rights to choose private schools, but successive education ministers, including Brendan Nelson and Julie Bishop, avoided serious reform of the public sector... The *Australian* has been an unapologetic critic of the Rudd Government's fridge-magnet politics fearing that stunts such as FuelWatch, GroceryChoice and the alcopops tax were distracting from real reform. Yesterday, we saw signs of a more assertive and progressive leader, one driven by conviction, not spin, the Mr Rudd

we were anticipating when we endorsed his candidacy last November. He has set himself a challenging task. We wish him well.”

The response of the Murdoch press points to what is at stake. Rudd won the support of decisive sections of the ruling elite during last November’s election campaign after attacking Howard from the right on his government’s economic reform record. Accusing the Coalition government of coasting on the back of the China-driven commodity price boom, the Labor Party pledged to launch a new wave of “free market” economic reforms—at the direct expense of the working class—in order to ensure the “international competitiveness” of Australian capitalism.

Education was at the forefront of this agenda, with Rudd pledging to reform education—from kindergarten to university level—in order to boost national productivity growth.

The prime minister notably began his National Press Club speech by referring to the “complex set of economic challenges” caused by the US sub-prime mortgage crisis and related turmoil on the international financial markets. He then described the Howard government’s term in office as a decade of “squandered opportunities”, with productivity growth declining from 3.3 percent in the mid-1990s to 1.1 percent in the current cycle. “The core of our economic reform agenda is to build long-term productivity growth—in large part by an education revolution in the quantity and quality of our national investments in the education of the next generation of Australians,” Rudd declared.

The Labor government has now embraced many of the most right-wing education measures, particularly as trialled in Britain and the US. Gillard last month met with New York City school chancellor Joel Klein who introduced a report-card system for public schools, awarding A to F grades based on student test results. Rudd’s education minister was reportedly “bowled over” by Klein, who works under right-wing billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Rudd and Gillard’s proposals have been enthusiastically welcomed by the media’s most reactionary commentators, such as Miranda Devine and Andrew Bolt. In his *Herald Sun* column yesterday, Bolt called the new measures “terrific”. “Here at last was Rudd tackling a real problem with real solutions as he gave his most conservative speech yet,” he crowed. “All this was straight out of the conservative think tanks... Rudd’s reputation now hangs on his ability to implement the most right-wing plan he found in Howard’s desk.”

The logical trajectory of Rudd’s measures is the introduction of a “school voucher” system, long advocated by the most right-wing think tanks in the country. That is the significance of his comment that he no longer recognises the “outdated divisions between public and private [school] provision”, and regards parental “choice” as paramount. First proposed by the “free market” economist Milton Friedman in the 1950s, vouchers have been advanced as a means of entirely abolishing the public system, allowing parents to spend their allotted voucher at a private school of their choosing.

Education and democracy

Labor’s measures have profound implications for the national education system, and for society as a whole—none of which has been raised by any section of the political and media establishment.

The new testing-based regime reduces education to the most narrowly focussed and empirically verifiable measure of children’s intellectual progress. The conception that education ought to involve the cultivation of a child’s complex social, intellectual, artistic, and physical capacities has been effectively junked. Drawing from the democratic conceptions first developed in the period of the Enlightenment, the most advanced social

and pedagogical theorists in the twentieth century—first liberal, then socialist—stressed that a precondition for any genuinely democratic society was a well-educated population, capable of critical and creative thought. Such a conception is now anathema.

The Rudd government instead regards a school education as nothing more than vocational training. Whatever cannot be tested is valueless. This vulgar position finds reflection in the corporate-derived jargon that pervades Labor’s policy announcements. During his National Press Club address, the prime minister even referred to the need for schools to “value-add” their students.

By tying school funding and teachers’ salaries to standardised test results, the government is creating a situation in which all available resources will increasingly be directed towards coaching students to rote-learn the information required to pass tests. Schools that channel money into providing an environment that addresses the myriad social and psychological problems young people face today will effectively be punished. Similarly, those schools with large numbers of children from non-English speaking backgrounds or with learning or intellectual disabilities will be disadvantaged. And there will now be a financial imperative for school principals to discourage such students from enrolling in their schools.

Particularly affected will be schools in working class and impoverished areas where many children are set back by family and social problems such as unemployment, mental illness, and drug and alcohol addiction. Under the Rudd government’s scheme, unless such students can demonstrate improved test scores over time, they face having their school closed or amalgamated into huge “super schools”. Such a dislocating and potentially traumatic experience could well result in those students being placed in larger classes with even less opportunity for personal attention from teachers and school staff.

There have been warnings of other “unintended consequences” of the new testing system. The principal of Melbourne’s University High School, Rob Newton, said he feared schools would now feel pressured to rig results and push students into “soft” subjects where they could achieve higher marks. Others have pointed to Britain, where grades have allegedly been artificially inflated because schools can’t afford to fail their students.

Widespread opposition is already emerging. One letter writer to the *Age* commented: “Surely the federal government should be consistent in linking funding to school performance and insist that state schools do what private schools do—sack underperforming students.” Another concise letter in the same newspaper added: “Why are the Liberal Party and the Nationals bothering to merge when the Liberal Party and Labor already have, thanks to Rudd.”

Patrick FitzGerald, deputy principal at Young High School in New South Wales, wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “Never in 32 years as a professional educator have I felt so abandoned. If there is a problem in a school, Kevin Rudd says sack the principal and the teachers. He does not say give them adequate resources and smaller class sizes. He does not say provide support to deal with a broad range of challenging students.”

Opposition will only intensify once school communities start to experience the full impact of the government’s measures. For his part, Rudd has already indicated he is conscious of how unpopular the reforms will be. “For us this is serious business,” he told the National Press Club. “We intend to prosecute this with full vigour, knowing full well that there’s going to be blowback on the way through.”



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