

OPINION – GUEST COLUMNISTS ADDRESS VALUES BASED ISSUES

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A Passion for Learning. It's a Values Thing.

A speech to the Sydney Institute 21 November 2006, by

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After ten years of defeat and despair, there is a simple question modern Labor can't avoid.

What is Labor for?

What is our purpose, and how do we propose to fulfil it?

All political movements exist for a reason. Sometimes they change because their reason for existence changes. Or, like the Democratic Labor Party and the Australian Democrats, they fade away because their purpose has disappeared.

Since 1996, we've spent a lot of time spinning our wheels. We've made great progress over the past year, but there's a lot more to be done. We now need to define our core mission.

Labor's founding purpose was to regulate the labour market. That's still central to our task, but it's now a defensive purpose. We're protecting past achievements rather than building new ones.

Since 1891 we've added new layers to our mission statement. Public ownership. Social security. Universal health services. Environmental sustainability. Each has driven great Labor achievements.

These purposes still drive modern Labor, but they don't differentiate us from our opponents as much as they once did. Labor privatised the Commonwealth Bank and Qantas. The conservatives have expanded the welfare state. They call themselves the best friends Medicare ever had. These points of difference are now more obvious to us than they are to the wider community.

Labor can't succeed by just defending the achievements of the past. We have to pursue big changes for the future.

Tony Cutcliffe recently described modern Labor as "a type of club whose purpose is to create powerful careers for its insiders, while building a public face around celebrity, self-righteousness and puerile nationalism".(1) Unfair, perhaps. But he poses a challenge. If we aren't the bunch of cynical careerists in this caricature, who are we?

What does the Light on the Hill now consist of? Labour market regulation? Public ownership? Government services?

It's easy to respond with jargon and platitudes. Sure, we're in favour of outcomes like better living standards and greater opportunity. Who isn't? We're more than just competent technocrats who manage state institutions. What is it that makes our vision for Australia's future fundamentally different from our competitors?

The need to have a clear answer to this question is critical. Politics is changing around us. If we don't adapt to the emerging world we'll be left behind.

We aren't the only party with this problem. The US Democrats have very similar problems. They've just won a referendum on the Bush presidency, but they haven't really resolved what they're actually *for*.

Two trends are threatening parties like Labor around the world. The first is entertainment politics. The faultlines between left and right have blurred, and politics has drifted into the world of entertainment. We now have celebrities becoming candidates and candidates becoming celebrities. Being famous for being famous is becoming an important qualification for political office. Party affiliation still matters, but parties now seek out celebrities as candidates. Aspiring leaders try to become celebrities and make themselves the issue.

Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger are American entertainers who became politicians. The likely presidential contest in France between Nicholas Sarkozy and Segolene Royal is about politicians becoming entertainers. Royal "dwells little on specifics and a lot on style".(2) Sarkozy changes shape almost daily. Everyone knows who they are, but not much about what they stand for.

New British Conservative leader David Cameron is pursuing the same strategy. A saviour is carefully marketed as different from ordinary politicians without actually standing for anything. His ideas are more marketing devices than serious policies.

The gradual decline of political intermediaries like trade unions, service clubs, churches and friendly societies has left the media as the totally unchallenged point of connection between ordinary citizens and the political process. Entertainment has become the dominant factor in democratic politics.

Why does this matter to Labor? Because serious policies can be complex and boring. If we don't express a central purpose that is clear and simple, our worthy social democratic initiatives will drown in a sea of personality politics. Entertainment is depoliticising politics. We need cut-through content to succeed.

The second global trend threatening Labor is the growing divide between

rationalists and traditionalists.(3) If you want to see the future, look at Eastern Europe. Since the collapse of communism, new political forces have emerged in countries like Poland and Hungary. The new faultlines look nothing like the ones we're used to. The new divide is between educated, cosmopolitan urban dwellers and low-skilled urban and rural workers and pensioners. One group is socially left-wing and economically right-wing, the other socially rightwing and economically left-wing. Former communists are now pro-market modernisers. The standard bearers of collectivism are religious nationalists who are often openly racist.(4)

Why does this matter to Australian Labor? Because we have a foot in both camps. John Howard's wedge politics strategy is built on this divide. If we don't work out a way to conquer it, it will conquer us. Our core purpose has to inspire commitment from both sides of the divide. Managerial competence and political skills might enable us to prevail at the State level for some time, but something much more fundamental is required to succeed nationally.

So exactly who are we? Over recent years I've thought a lot about my own motivation. About why I'm Labor. I've come to understand my core values much more clearly. I've realised there's a golden thread running through Labor's identity which reflects my own outlook on life. It's been there from the beginning, and it's dominated our message in the modern era. It's at the heart of Labor's mission.

That golden thread is learning. To me, more than anything else, Labor stands for learning.

Our small country town didn't get television until I was ten, so I read books. At boarding school I read under the blankets after lights out. At university I did more subjects than I needed to. And I did a Masters degree in history out of interest. I've been learning Greek for many years. I've written several books. I delight in the learning I can pursue as a member of parliament.

To me learning is a profoundly wonderful thing in its own right. You don't just learn to make money. You also learn because it makes you a better person. The reason I'm in the Labor Party is because that's where the deepest commitment to learning is in Australian politics. The thing that makes me Labor is love of learning.

Learning has been central to progressive politics in Australia from the beginning. The first mechanics institute was established in Hobart in 1827. In the 1870s and 1880s, working men's colleges were established around Australia.(5) Workers Education Associations were established in Australia in 1910 following their creation in Britain. Marxist influenced Labor Colleges and Plebs Leagues were founded in various States in the 1920s.(6)

Starting in Victoria in 1872, the principle of free compulsory and secular education was adopted by all the Australian colonies.(7) Driven by crusading liberal politicians like Charles Pearson, this principle was central to the emerging Australian nation. Paul Kelly identified five elements in the

Australian Settlement in his landmark book *The End of Certainty: White Australia, Protection, Wage Arbitration, State Paternalism and Imperial Benevolence*.(8) He should have included free, compulsory and secular education on the list. This principle was crucial to the creation of a distinctively Australian social framework. The phrase “free compulsory and secular” still appears in national Labor platforms nearly 100 years later.(9)

This commitment to learning came initially from progressive liberals. It soon became central to the labour movement’s mission. Our most famous icon is called the Tree of Knowledge. It’s not called the Tree of Public Ownership, The Tree of Labour Market Regulation, or the Tree of Welfare.

Labor commitment to learning was modest in the first half of the twentieth century. The first political leader to promise Federal funding for schools was Sir Robert Menzies in the mid-1940s. John Curtin rejected the idea. We didn’t commit to it until 1961.(10)

Labour movement attitudes to learning were mixed in that era. Many unionists disdained university education as the domain of the spoilt rich. Yet the trade union movement reflected a rich tradition of trade and technical learning which later culminated in the sweeping reforms of the 1980s inspired by Laurie Carmichael and the ACTU. This tradition of learning was a core element of militant trade unionism. John Halfpenny was one of Australia’s most militant union leaders. He was also Victorian Apprentice of the Year in his youth.

Since that period, commitment to learning has gradually become the primary theme in Labor’s belief system.

The Whitlam Government was defined more by education initiatives like the Schools Commission and free university tuition than any other policy. In his 1974 election campaign speech, Whitlam described the Schools Commission as “the greatest single achievement of our Government”. (11) The background work on this policy began as far back as 1964. (12)

Since then, learning has always been at the heart of Labor’s message. Think of the massive expansion of university education. The creation of Cooperative Research Centres. The Training Guarantee Levy. The development of competency – based training. The establishment of the Australian National Training Authority. Labor market programs with mutual obligation requirements on training. Massive increases in school retention rates. The Clever Country. So many big things happened in the Hawke-Keating era that we tend to overlook the lasting importance of learning. (13)

Since Labor lost office in 1996 learning has been even more critical. Think of Kim Beazley’s Knowledge Nation policy. Mark Latham’s Learning or Earning strategy for young Australians. Kim Beazley’s Skills in Schools blueprint and universities white paper. Over the last two years, Labor has produced more substantial policy in education and training than in any other area. Steve

Bracks describes education as his government's number one priority. Craig Emerson is promoting radical reform proposals built on a simple premise: learning is the key to better social and economic outcomes.(14) How often have we heard Labor leaders use the slogan "education, education, education"?

Labor's commitment to learning can also be seen at the local level. The City of Hume has established a Global Learning Village centre in Broadmeadows as a learning hub that offers library resources and dozens of courses for local residents. With assistance from private donors like Ford, Visy and the Age, the Village offers a love of learning prize every year to a year 4 child in each of the forty-four primary schools in the City of Hume. It funds a Celebration of Learning Festival. It aims to get people "to embrace learning as a way of life".(15)

Labor councillors have been at the forefront of this commitment. Former mayor Gary Jungwirth has played a leading role. His passion for creating learning opportunities in one of Melbourne's most disadvantaged areas makes him a true Labor hero.(16)

Learning is much wider than education. It's not just a skills issue, a productivity issue, an economic inputs issue. It's a values issue. Learning increases opportunity, it enables participation, it opens hearts and minds. It's at the centre of debates about childcare, preschools, schools, universities, TAFE, apprenticeships, labour market programs, neighbourhood houses, adult education, welfare, immigration and aged care. It helps deliver better social and health outcomes, like alleviating loneliness and delaying the onset of dementia. The Smith Family defines learning as "the foundation for helping disadvantaged children to break free from the spiral of poverty".(17)

If there were no skills crisis, would Labor still be passionately committed to expanding our nation's investment in learning? You bet we would! That passion defines the kind of society we want to create. It reflects our core values, not just our prescription for better economic outcomes. Learning is about discovery. It's about building a better world.

Labor's commitment to learning now matters more than ever. Why? Because under John Howard the Liberal Party has gradually become an anti-learning party, seeking to exploit the disdain for learning that's deeply embedded in Australian popular culture.

What makes you angry tells you a lot about your personal beliefs. Denigration of learning has been a persistent theme in the Howard Government's message. Over the past ten years I can't think of anything that's made me angrier than this regular undermining of learning values. Australia is one of the few countries in the world where "academic" is a term of derision. We worship sports people and ignore intellectual achievers. We revere the practical and physical, and barely tolerate the cerebral.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when national development was all about digging

mines and building dams and grazing sheep, this dislike of learning was merely an oddity. It didn't matter that our levels of educational achievement were well below those of similar countries. It sure matters now.

I recently reread Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country*. (18) It was a scary experience. Because so little has changed. More than four decades later, His basic critique still rings true. Phrases like "triumphant mediocrity", (19) "cleverness can be considered un-Australian", (20) and "a nation more concerned with styles of life than with achievement" (21) haven't lost their bite.

A few months ago, Shane Warne was awarded an honorary doctorate in business administration on his birthday by Southampton Solent University. (22) To the Australian media, this was all a bit of a hoot. Warne decked out in academic gown and funny hat provided a great photo opportunity.

It just made me angry. Sure, it was an English university performing this parody, but the message was clear. Higher learning is all a bit of laugh, just funny people in funny hats. Fair dinkum Aussie blokes don't do that sort of stuff. Having someone like Warne, who's notorious for his lack of interest in learning at school, (23) parading around like a pantomime horse in an academic outfit was very sad. Nobody else seemed to notice or care.

This nonsense is roughly equivalent to inducting John Howard into the Australian Cricket Hall of Fame for his infamous bowling performance in Kashmir. I'm a serious cricket fan like many other Australians, but I'm even more passionate about learning. When sporting celebrities proudly announce they've never read a book, they're telling young Australians that learning is for nerds.

John Howard's glib phrases mask an unrelenting assault on Australian learning. The party of learning under Menzies has become the party of ignorance under Howard.

Few remember that when Howard was deposed as Liberal leader by Andrew Peacock in 1989 he was offered the Education portfolio. He declined because the job wasn't important enough.

He hasn't changed. Last year he observed that leaving school early is fine if you're not academically inclined. (24) His former Education Minister Brendan Nelson sought to inflame resentment against universities among non-tertiary educated workers. He suggested creationism should be taught in schools. (25) Howard's current Education Minister claims that Maoists are writing school curriculums, tries to ban books on terrorism, and demands that the States contribute to funding universities. (26) His Vocational Education and Training Minister is grinding Industry Skills Councils into the ground. When I published a book about Australia's future, Peter Costello quipped that Labor was turning into a book club. Contempt for learning is at the core of the modern Liberal Party.

In an era when education and training are more crucial than ever before, the Howard Government's performance is simply scandalous. Our school completion rates are way below the OECD average.²⁷ In 2005, a staggering 46 per cent of school leavers were not enrolled in any form of post-school education.⁽²⁸⁾ Our average education levels are significantly below those in comparable countries at all age levels.⁽²⁹⁾ A recent OECD study found that Australia spent the lowest amount on preschool education of the twenty countries surveyed.⁽³⁰⁾ Since 1995, Australian government spending on higher education and training has fallen by 7 per cent, while the OECD average has increased by 48 per cent.⁽³¹⁾ Bob Birrell nailed it a few weeks ago: "Far too many young people are not being equipped for a labour market increasingly demanding technical, analytical and managerial skills".⁽³²⁾ This lack of commitment to learning entrenches poverty and disadvantage. Early school leavers have much higher unemployment rates, and much bleaker prospects in life.⁽³³⁾

Between December 2005 and May 2006, Government estimates of revenue for 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2009-09 were upgraded by an astonishing \$42 billion. The Government has committed all of this extraordinary windfall to new spending and tax cuts. Barely more than 1 per cent has been dedicated to education and training. John Howard's real message is clear: Ignorance is Bliss.

I want Australia to be a country which values learning above all other things. In John Howard's Australia it's an afterthought.

But we shouldn't imagine it's all Howard's fault. It isn't. He's simply exploiting and magnifying social prejudice that's deeply embedded in our culture.

Our indifferent attitude to learning isn't just the fault of governments. It's also the fault of parents. Too many Australians regard schools as glorified childminding centres, and take little interest in what goes on inside them. Too many are ready to attack teachers and governments for all kinds of failings, but don't take enough responsibility for their kids' commitment to learning.

The more contact I have with different schools, the more I'm convinced that the hidden factor in school performance is parental aspiration. Resources are obviously critical, but attitudes to learning in the family environment are also vital. The passive welfare concept of education understates the crucial importance of aspiration. Lack of achievement is often a product of lack of expectation. If a child grows up in an environment where learning isn't valued, he or she is less likely to succeed in learning and in life. That's why the Global Learning Village is so important. It seeks to change attitudes to learning in schools, communities and families.⁽³⁴⁾ And it's why Howard's messages are so damaging. If our nation's government doesn't value learning, why should its citizens?

Our she'll be right mentality is an enduring part of our culture. Hostility to learning is deeply ingrained. It's fading, as parents realise how crucial skills are to their kids futures, but it's still strong. Young people who want to learn are always more likely to succeed at school and at work. Wouldn't it be great if Australia were led by a Prime Minister committed to promoting learning, not attacking it?

Commitment to learning is the key to individual and national success. It's being undermined by conservative politicians stoking popular prejudice. And it's being undermined by post-modernist theories. When leading educators argue that learning history is no more important than learning tapestry, something is seriously wrong.(35) If everything is considered equally valid, what's the point of learning anything?

Learning doesn't only happen in education institutions. It's not restricted to lecture theatres and laboratories. It's not just for academic types in classrooms. It happens at childcare. It happens in community groups. It happens on the job. Many skilled blue-collar workers lament the demise of training in their chosen trades. Talk to a Telstra technician and you'll see what I mean. Skilled workers have a pride in their craft that's based on years of learning.

Our need for skilled technical workers has never been greater. Yet somehow we've managed to alienate countless young people from learning through an excessive focus on university entrance in schools. We've increased the barriers to learning.

Labor's committed to fixing this problem. Kim Beazley's plan for specialist senior technical colleges will make a big difference. In a world where skills are the best safety net, we can't afford to push young people away from learning.

We've got a huge task in front of us. Let's change Australian attitudes to learning. Let's resolve the endless State-Federal, public-private, and academic-technical arguments. Let's commit ourselves to greater investment in learning across the board. For Australia to compete in a rapidly changing world we have to become a learning society.

Labor's primary goal isn't extending public ownership. It isn't extending the welfare state. It's not even extending labour market regulation, though we're engaged in a life-or-death struggle over Workchoices.

Our primary goal is to extend access to learning, to ensure everyone can participate fully in our society and live good, fulfilling lives.

Everyone's good at something. We have to ensure everyone can turn that ability into a worthwhile contribution to our society, and be rewarded for it. Learning changes lives. It's the key to a better future for our kids, and a better future for our country. We need more investment in learning. We need a much stronger commitment to the ethos of learning. And we need to

abandon our lingering culture of mediocrity and ignorance. It might be amusing to some, but it's dragging us down.

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- (1) Cutcliffe, T: "Death of the Tree of Knowledge a metaphor for Labor", *Canberra Times* October 6 2006.
 - (2) *The Economist* October 7, 2006
 - (3) I first identified this divide in Australia in "Labourism's Last Days" *Australian Left Review* No 12, June 1991, p.10.
 - (4) See the interesting discussion of Eastern European politics in Boyes, R: "Continental Drift", *Australian Financial Review* (Review Section). October 13 2006. A similar theme runs through Thomas Friedman's book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (Farrar Straus Girous, New York 1999). This growing division is reflected in the politics of many nations. It can be seen in recent elections in India and Thailand, for example. Notwithstanding the demise of One Nation, it's becoming more prominent in Australia. See for example, Burrell, S: "New class of attitude rules", *The Age* September 30 2006.
 - (5) Beddoe, J: "Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia", *Aplis*, 16(3) September 2003, pp.-123-125
 - (6) Turner, A: "*Independent Working Class Education in Australia 1917-1929*" (Melbourne University, 1981)
 - (7) Barcan, A: *A History of Australian Education* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980).
 - (8) Kelly, P: *The End of Certainty* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992) pp. 1-2
 - (9) Tanner, L: "The Policy Formulation Process of an Australian Political Party in Opposition: A Case Study of the Australian Labor Party's Schools Commission Proposal", *Melbourne Studies in Education*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1983) p. 49.
 - (10) Bessant, B and Spaul A.D: *Politics of Schooling* (Pitman, Melbourne, 1976) p.102. Although Gough Whitlam first argued for Federal funding in 1954: Tanner, op, cit, p.55.
 - (11) Tanner, op.cit. p.67.
 - (12) See my detailed analysis of the origins of the Schools Commission policy Tanner, op-cit,pp. 52 et seq.
 - (13) Kelly's book, still the best analysis of the era, only mentions education fleetingly on a handful of occasions.
 - (14) See Emerson, C: "Expanding Opportunity or the Welfare State" (Centre for Independent Studies Policy – Makers series, Sydney, 2006)
 - (15) City of Hume: *Global Learning Village* (Broadmeadows, 2005)
 - (16) Former Australian Republican Movement convenor Frank McGuire, sadly not an ALP member, also deserves a lot of the credit.
 - (17) *Australian Financial Review*, August 25 2006.
 - (18) Horne, D: *The Lucky Country* (Penguin, Melbourne, 1964)
 - (19) *ibid.* , p.-10
 - (20) *ibid.* , p.-11
 - (21) *ibid.* , p.-233
 - (22) "*Warne Tops Spin Doctor Honours*", Daily Telegraph, Sept 15 2006.

- (23) Barry, P: *Spun Out: The Shane Warne Story* (Bantam, Sydney, 2006.),pp. 30-33.
- (24) *Sunday* March 6 2005
- (25) AAP, August 10, 2005
- (26) See, for example, Bishop, J: "*Let's Split the Bill for Universities*", *Australian*, October 16 2006.
- (27) Emerson, C: "Squandered Opportunity" (Making the Boom Pay Conference, November 2, 2006) p.-14.
- (28) Birrell, B: "Debunking the Myths About Work" *Age*, October 10 2006
- (29) Mitchell, A: "Human Capital Squandered", *Australian Financial Review*, August 23 2006.
- (30) *Starting Strong* (OECD, Paris, 2006).
- (31) OECD, quoted in Emerson, "Expanding Opportunity or the Welfare State", op-cit: 4
- (32) Birrell, op-cit.
- (33) Emerson, C "Squandered Opportunity", op cit pp 8-9. The Productivity Commission has expressed similar concerns: cited in Mitchell, op.cit.
- (34) Research in Britain suggests that poor white communities have the lowest education outcomes, even lower than those in poor migrant communities like Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, because of very low expectations and aspirations: "The Forgotten Underclass", *The Economist*, October 28 2006.
- (35) Edmunds, D: "Turning Back the Clock on Learning", *Canberra Times* October 12 2006.