



Independent Schools  
Council of Australia

## MAJOR SHIFT ON SCHOOLS POLICY

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Federal Opposition Leader Kim Beazley announced at a National Press Club lunch on 3 May 2006 that the ALP was dropping its 'hit list' of independent schools that would face funding cuts under a federal Labor government. This policy shift was styled by a number of journalists and commentators as an end to 'Mark Latham's class warfare tactics' (*The West Australian*, 4/5/06, 'Beazley dumps Latham ideas in bid for PM').

Beneath the headlines, which infer policy-making driven by the ballot box, a more subtle policy shift is evident. This shift has in part been driven by senior ALP figures who have recognised two important features in today's landscape of school education in Australia: that non-government schools are now major providers of Australian schooling, to the extent that in 2005 two out of every five Year 12 students received at least part of their school education in a non-government school; and that families of students in non-government schools are contributing some \$5 billion annually to Australia's expenditure on education.

In an opinion piece in *The Australian Financial Review* ('Flexibility the key to education reform', 10/4/06) Labor MP Dr Craig Emerson called for the harnessing of private resources in a more competitive schooling system. In *The Australian* ('Labor ends class war on schools', 6/4/06), Shadow Minister for Finance Lindsay Tanner was reported as asking whether 'we are going to be a nation that invests in schools or in backyard swimming pools'. Federal ALP President, Warren Mundine, in an opinion piece published in *The Australian* ('ALP must back parental choice', 5/5/06), asked 'why then the ambivalence over extracting private resources? We need to thank parents who care enough about their children that they are prepared to ration their lifestyles to accommodate their child's needs'. He goes on to acknowledge that 'we have come a long way from the view that children's education can be delivered through only public means'.

For too long debate on school education in Australia has floundered because 'public education' has been equated solely with government ownership of schools. The 'public

versus private' debate has served to obscure what amounts to a significant shift in the costs of schooling to families. The continued growth of the independent schools sector shows that parents are prepared to dig deep into their own pockets to contribute to the education of their children, but they also expect governments to contribute a fair share. The recent shift in the ALP's schools policy could well signify that Australia is at last ready for an education debate that is grounded in reality, not mired in ideology.