



the



EGGLESTON

report

Senator Alan Eggleston: Working for Western Australia

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Protecting federalism must be a priority

It is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a need for we in the Liberal Party to reaffirm our commitment to the concept of federalism.

The reason to this is that while federalism is enshrined as one of our fundamental beliefs rather regrettably there is an increasing pattern of centralisation of power and control in Canberra.

What is most disturbing about this trend is that it is occurring under a Coalition Federal Government and means that precedents are being set which will ensure that the Coalition parties will be in a weak position to argue against the openly centralist policies of any future Labor Government.

Rather than overtly seeking to challenge the constitutional right of the states to set policy in various areas, the power of finance is being used by Canberra to dictate adherence to its political policy directives.

This is being done in two ways; firstly it is increasingly the practice in providing funding for Federal programs to bypass state governments and direct the money to local and regional authorities. When the Whitlam and Hawke-Keating governments adopted this approach Liberals around Australia protested that this was a challenge to federalism as indeed it was.

The second method being used to impose Canberra policy views on the states is to tie policy dictates to Federal grants. The latest example of this being in education where the States are being threatened that non-compliance with the Canberra view will mean that Federal grants to education could be withheld. In my opinion this is an outrageous abuse of the financial power of the Federal government and I endorse the comments made about this by my State colleagues Peter Collier MLC and Norman Moore MLC.

It seems to be forgotten that it was as an emergency wartime measure that the States handed the power of taxation over to the Federal government. The Federal government has retained the power of levying taxation by playing the weaker states off against the stronger but nevertheless implicit in these arrangements there always previously was respect for the federalist nature of the Australian Constitution which provided defined and limited role for the Commonwealth and areas such as education were the province of the States.

While certainly issues such as uniform standards are reasonable objectives in today's world, the view that Canberra always knows best is a fallacious approach which makes no allowances for the very real regional differences occurring

around this great country.

Writing in the March 2005 edition of the IPA review Professor Greg Craven of Curtin University said "Liberals such as the Robert Menzies harking back to the great constitutional founders such as Deakin and Barton, comprehended that federalism was not just a regrettable historical reality of Australian government. Quite beyond that it was an organising principle of government designed to protect those qualities of freedom, balance, community and difference dear to all liberals and conservatives".

Professor C Craven continued "to take two of the most obvious illustrations federalism first promotes freedom by balancing the powers of two spheres of government against the other so ensuring that in Australia there is by definition no totality power consequently from education to health from industrial relations to the environment there is no single government in Australia that is all-powerful and none whose proposals cannot be subjected to an organised critique from a fellow government."

The Professor added "federalism ensures or aims to ensure that the policy issues closest to regional communities are determined substantially by those



communities themselves."

I regard the role of State governments to act as regional watchdogs protecting the interests of their regions (the states) and to develop public policy solutions appropriate to the particular circumstances stances and needs of their communities and people.

It is very interesting to note that with this trend towards ever greater centralism in Australia we are going against international trends. In Canada are for example (which has a Unionist constitution with a strong central government) the provinces are becoming increasingly powerful and challenging Ottawa's power. Also in Europe, European Union power is required to be devolved to the lowest appropriate level namely the member states.

Our federalist system has served Australia well for over a hundred years and while from time to time some adjustments to its operation have been required, the basic concept of the diffusion of power and allowance for difference has worked well. Accordingly I believe that it is important that we in the Liberal Party reaffirm our fundamental commitment to Federalism and that this be honoured in the practise of government in this country.

Cross media ownership reforms

I chaired the Senate inquiry into the changes to the cross media ownership laws which were passed into law by the Federal Parliament recently.

The rationale for the changes to our media laws was recognition that we now live in a different world where news and entertainment can be accessed not only through the traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television but also via the Internet and from other digital platforms such as screens on mobile phones. The government felt that it was important that Australia's media laws be updated to cope with the digital world of the 21st century.

The government was also hoping through these changes to encourage more people to take out digital television and there will be new digital services available to the public. Although I was personally disappointed that the government has not agreed to permit the existing free to air television stations to provide multi-channel services, there are complex issues involved and this will come in time.

The Senate committee was concerned to protect media diversity and ensure competition continued in both metropolitan and regional media. Recommendations were made to strengthen the hand of the ACCC in policing competition and of the Australian Communications media authority (ACMA) in preserving diversity in our media.

The committee was particularly concerned to ensure that in regional areas local content and news of local events was available.

I was particularly pleased that the committee recommended that digital spectrum be provided to community television services around Australia and trust the Government will agree to this. Community TV has a viewing audience of over 3.7 million



people and provides great service to the public.

The above photograph shows myself at the Perth community television station Access 31 presenting a Prime Minister's Work for the Dole Award to the station and to Mission Australia for the innovative work for the dole program which has been in place at Access 31 TV for several years. I was very impressed with the program because it shows that work for the dole really can provide people with useful job skills and is not just about filling in time doing menial tasks.

Native title issue

I welcome the Federal Government's decision to appeal the native title finding over Perth handed down in the Federal Court by Mr Justice Wilcox recently.

The Wilcox decision to grant native title over the Perth metropolitan area is important because it goes against the principles established in the Yorta Yorta case where native title was claimed on the Murray River and adjacent properties. In this case continuous association with the land was considered to be required before native title could be found to exist. The Noongar people are thoroughly urbanised and it is hard to accept that they require land for traditional practises. If native title was proven crown land and waterways could be subject to land access agreements with the native title holders which could have a significant impact on lifestyle in the south west of WA.

The Wilcox decision could have profound implications for not only the people of Western Australia but also for cities all over this country.

Similar claims have now been lodged over the Gold Coast, Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne, Adelaide and parts of Sydney. Experience in the north-west of Western Australia has shown that native title can cause considerable problems for local

government pastoralists, farmers, small-business, tourist developments and mining companies.

In towns such as Port Hedland, Karratha and Broome, which are bursting at the seams, there is almost no land available for housing because it is held under native title. Large mining companies are able to purchase their way out of native title claims but this is not the case for small mining companies, farmers, small businesses and tourist operators or local government.

I'm also concerned about the proposal by the State government to negotiate with the Noongars over the Perth claim before the validity of the claim is determined by the courts. A few years ago there was a native title claim on the Burrup Peninsular in which public access to the northern beaches was threatened. In this case the present State government is said to have paid around \$15 million to the native title claimants before the court determined that no valid native title claim existed. The State Government however never asked for the money back and one can only be very concerned that the price of compensation for the native title claim over Perth could run into hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayers money.

Mobile phones needed for Marble Bar

I HAVE recently written to Prime Minister John Howard to outline the importance of securing mobile phone coverage for Marble Bar. In these times, it is unacceptable to me that a town like Marble Bar should not have mobile phone coverage, which would greatly assist local people to coordinate emergency services.

It would also provide a welcome boost to the tourist industry. Marble Bar residents have worked extremely hard over several decades to have the road between Port Hedland and Marble Bar sealed, and with the increased tourism potential of the region it is now vital that phone coverage follow. The final

36.5km of an all-weather road linking Port Hedland and Marble Bar has made the town more accessible than ever, but as local people point out, tourists these days will not stay long if they are unable to keep in touch with those back home.

The Marble Bar Tourist Association has been very proactive in lobbying for this and have rightly pointed out that every business in town suffers if the needs of tourists are not met.

I will be pursuing this matter very vigorously in the Federal Parliament to ensure that the people of Marble Bar get access to what is these days considered a very necessary form of telecommunication.

Addressing the skills shortage

THE shortage of skilled labour in Australia has become an increasing problem and I welcome the Federal Government announcement to invest \$837 million in skills training.

Recruiting skilled workers is a problem for employers around Australia but particularly in the Pilbara where the resource boom has led to an extremely high demand for workers.

This shortage has led to a sharp rise in the living costs in the Pilbara, as employers in a highly competitive environment face the need to lure workers with increasing wages and benefits to the region.

This sharp rise in the costs associated with attracting people to the Pilbara makes it very difficult for small business to prosper, and also sharply raises the cost of living for those whose jobs are not necessarily direct beneficiaries of the resource boom.

As a long time Pilbara resident, I have received a lot of feedback from people in the region highlighting these difficulties during the last few years and it is why I am very pleased that this package has been announced.

It will mean that people can train wherever they see fit, and move to the Pilbara where their skills will be in very high demand.

The package will especially assist adults to gain literacy and numeracy

skills that are basic requirements in the workplace.

The Australian Government's \$3000 Work Skills vouchers will provide a great opportunity for people aged 25 years and over to gain the basic skills they need to succeed in their jobs and give them a head start in the workplace. From January 1, 2007, 30,000 people a year will benefit from this initiative - this means 150,000 Australians over five years.

New financial incentives will help more Australians looking to take up a trade apprenticeship in mid-career. Apprentices in traditional trades will also receive support to help them gain the necessary skills to run their own businesses.

The package makes a substantial new investment in Australia's future engineering skills. As well as funding more university engineering places, it offers additional employer incentives so that more Australians gain higher level technical skills at Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels.

The Australian Government is already delivering a range of initiatives, and will continue to do so as part of its \$10.8 billion investment over the next four years in building Australia's future.

Today's announcement further underlines this Government's commitment to skilling Australia and giving Australians the opportunity to learn a trade no matter what their age or walk of life.

Busselton jetty needs help

The historic Busselton jetty is a West Australian icon and a very popular tourist attraction for our South West. Along with Senator Judith Adams, I recently returned to my old home town to discuss options for funding much-needed repairs to the jetty with the Busselton Shire Council.

The council is seeking \$6 million as part of an \$18 million project to undertake major structural work at the site. I indicated to the council that they should first secure an equal share of the funding from the State Government before embarking on negotiations with the Federal Government.

While in Busselton, Senator Adams and I attended a briefing organised by the shire and toured the jetty. The 140-year-old Busselton jetty is the longest wooden jetty in the southern hemisphere, measuring 1.8km. It boasts an extremely colourful array of marine life beneath the surface, visible via an underwater observatory.

Possibly a successful partnership between the three tiers of government may be arranged to restore this wonderful attraction to its former glory.



Above: Meeting after the jetty meeting with fellow Liberals — including Busselton Shire Council deputy president Philippa Reid. Left: The jetty is an integral part of the scenic Busselton foreshore.

Treatment barriers for Kimberley patients

KIMBERLEY patients are facing unacceptable delays accessing emergency care because the Royal Flying Doctor Service is struggling to have them admitted to Royal Darwin Hospital.

The number of patients accepted from the Kimberley to Royal Darwin Hospital – the closest tertiary hospital to many of these patients – had dropped by about two thirds in the past decade.

Between 1997-98 Royal Darwin Hospital accepted 55 patients, between 2004-2005 the hospital accepted just 14. Earlier this year, the Federal Government announced a \$65.8 million commitment to fund increases in ICU bed numbers and a range of other measures so the hospital could be established as a National Critical Care and Trauma Centre for northern Australia and our neighbours.

Despite this, the RFDS still faces significant problems having its patients admitted to this facility.

Having practised medicine in the Pilbara for more than 20 years, I am well aware of the pressure that exists to get patients facing medical emergencies to the appropriate hospital swiftly and this situation concerns me greatly.

I have written to Health Minister Tony Abbott seeking a way to resolve this expeditiously, so that patients in remote areas of the Kimberley needing emergency treatment are taken straight to Darwin, where they clearly stand the best chance of receiving the best treatment.

Having flown with the Royal Flying Doctor Service regularly during my medical career, I have the utmost respect for the dedicated and hard-working staff of this organisation. Quite aside from the potentially disastrous medical toll on patients, flying patients from the Kimberley to Perth takes up considerable financial resources which would clearly be better spent in other areas of the organisation.

Finding an acceptable solution to this problem may even require a new funding agreement between the NT and WA State Governments.

The primary concern here must be patient care and it is totally unacceptable to me that patient care should be compromised by forcing patients in dire need of emergency treatment on a plane to Perth when they can access the care they need much more quickly in Darwin.

Australian history prize



Information about the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History is now available.

The prize is awarded for an outstanding publication or body of work that contributes significantly to an understanding of Australian history. The Prime Minister's prize comprises an embossed gold medallion and a grant of \$100,000 and may be awarded to an individual or a group.

The subjects of works submitted could include, but are not limited to historical events, historical figures (including biographies); and work covering a particular subject.

Eligible nominations can include a published book, a documentary film, a documentary for radio or television, CD-ROM, DVD or other form of multimedia. The nomination could include a series of these works. Nominations will be sought for any work first published, produced or broadcast between September 20 2004 and September 20 2006. Nominations close at 5pm on November 17 2006.

The Prime Minister's decision will have regard to a shortlist of nominees recommended by the Australian History Prize Committee. Committee members will be announced shortly.

Further information is available from www.dest.gov.au/pmhistoryprize

Historic resolution for local government

Having enjoyed a long involvement with local government — both as a councillor and mayor in Port Hedland — I was very pleased that the parliamentary resolution recognising local government in the Australian Parliament has now been passed.

This is a significant milestone for Local Government and the resolution delivers on a commitment made by the Government in its response to the Hawker Report in 2005. Through the Resolution, the Parliament acknowledges the importance of local government in the governance of Australia.

Local government is an integral part of the governance task in Australia. They are at the coalface of the community as many of the rules and regulations that have most impact on our everyday lives are made by local government.

Sadly, the Labor Party held up the process by introducing a politically motivated amendment calling for constitutional recognition for local government — constitutional recognition has been voted down by the public at two separate referendums and the Australian Government does not

support the concept. The Resolution recognises the vital role that local government plays in the great democracy enjoyed by all Australians. While the Australian Government continues to provide substantial, growing and ongoing assistance to local government, funding from the State and Territory governments falls year by year. The Australian Government has increased the total of financial assistance grants funding to local government for 2006-07 by \$67.4 million over 2005-06, bringing the total increase in funding to local government by the Coalition to around \$520 million since 1996.

Councils also received an extra \$307 million in Roads to Recovery funding in 2005-06, on top of their 2006-07 allocation, of which they can spend on priority road infrastructure projects.

The Australian Government has demonstrated its willingness to work in partnership with local government in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

The passing of the Parliamentary Resolution confirms the Australian Government's ongoing commitment to local government.

Swan school funding boost

Federal funds of more than \$70,000 will be spent on 10 projects in the Swan federal electorate to improve Aboriginal education outcomes.

I was pleased to announce the Australian Government's Whole of School Intervention Strategy grants, which total \$72,030 in Swan, to help implement creative approaches to improving Aboriginal student performance.

The program encourages schools, indigenous parents and communities to work together to improve Indigenous students' attendance, literacy and numeracy skills, retention from Years 10-12 and Year 12 results.

Projects include a \$27,400 allocation to Sevenoaks Senior College for

an attendance, numeracy, literacy and retention initiative and \$2700 for Bentley Primary School's Breakfast Club initiative. There is a significant indigenous population in the Swan electorate and it is important to improve young indigenous people's education.

Despite some improvement during the past 15 years, Aboriginal students remain disadvantaged in the classroom. In allocating these funds, the Federal Government aims to improve their academic performance, helping today's students become the leaders of tomorrow.

Education is the key to participation in Australia for indigenous youth.

New CD-ROM for workplaces released

A new Australian Government CD-ROM which offers valuable information and advice to employers and co-workers of people with mental illness has been released.

The Minister for Workforce Participation, Dr Sharman Stone, launched the new CD-ROM *Mental Health First Aid in the Workplace* as part of Mental Health Week.

One in every five Australian adults experience some form of mental illness in any given year. The course on the CD-ROM offers excellent information on creating a working environment that can support employees with mental health problems. It also aims to raise awareness of mental health

in the workforce and encourage greater acceptance of people with mental illness.

Workplaces provide first-aid training for their staff in case someone has an accident or other physical breakdown. It is equally important that the workplace is also trained to recognise and respond to mental health issues.

The Australian Government wants to ensure that all with a capacity to continue to work can stay in their job even if the individual experiences a mental health problem. For more information or to order a free copy of the CD-ROM, call the JobAccess Adviser service on 1800 464 800 or online via the JobAccess website at www.jobaccess.gov.au