Layers of turmoil offer challenges

By Pat Byrne President

The following is an excerpt of the President's Address to State Council Conference.

Welcome to State Council Conference

We are at the end of yet another year which brought far more turmoil than we could have ever expected. We thought that we'd seen the worst of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021 and that we were pretty well prepared - vaccinations mostly done – for the beginning of the year.

That bubble burst in Week 1 of Term 1.

The turmoil hasn't been confined to COVID-19 or to Australia. We look around and see democracy in a fragile state in many parts of the world. This week's mid-term US elections saw several candidates saying openly, even before polling day that they would refuse to accept a result which didn't go their way; statements based not on legitimate concerns about a faulty voting system but on a simple refusal to respect the outcome of a democratic process.

In Italy we saw the election of a government openly aligned to Mussolini – running with almost identical slogans; in France, Marine Le Pen's party of
the hard right secured 89 seats in parliament; the UK is a laughing stock; and the Philippines has returned to the Marcos family.

In all of this, the outcome in Brazil gives us hope, particularly for the rainforest which has been subject to unprecedented levels of destruction over the last five years and also for the saving of public education in Brazil, which has been undergoing an administrative and pedagogical transition from public management to that of the armed forces. This has been encouraged by linking funding to the establishment of 180 civilian-military schools in every state of the Brazilian federation – a goal which was to have been achieved by 2023.

While in Australia we haven't seen anything quite as extreme, the political environment is shifting as the hard right becomes bolder. The Robodebt Royal Commission is showing us every day the willingness of the previous government to ignore legal and agency advice and plough ahead in the expectation that people will put up with it.

The past nine years, it is fair to say, have provided some challenges, coinciding as they have with the presence of a federal government contemptuous of public education at best and at worst, openly hostile to its very existence.

The Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison governments demonstrated this hostility through their shameful, inequitable funding policy, through openly partisan efforts to repeatedly disrupt and slant the curriculum to reflect their own political bias and through repeated attacks on the calibre of public school teachers.

The demonstrations of obscene levels of wealth have become progressively worse over the last decade. In the last five years in NSW alone, building programs for private schools have cost $1.5 billion. Cranbrook School recently announced a five-storey upgrade costing $125 million. No longer content with a mere water polo pool, this upgrade is touted as finally overcoming the educational disadvantage of having only a "25 metre pool that wasn't very good for water polo". The swimming pool there looks like it belongs in the Australian Institute of Sport!

In the space of a few months two members of the LNP cabinet, both of whom were occupying the position of federal education minister at the time, publicly undermined public education in Australia.

In March of this year, Stuart Robert, while filling in for Alan Tudge, labelled 10 percent of public school teachers as duds and actually said that private schools would not have them even "for a second". His ill-informed speech yet again focused on portraying teachers as the problem, giving government license to reassert control over teachers' work through greater accountability measures which, in turn, further reduce teacher professionalism.

These comments followed those of Alan Tudge, whose interference in the review of the Australian Curriculum this time last year extended to comments about the then draft national curriculum. According to him, it presented a negative, miserable

view of Australia.

He said, “We should expect our young people leaving school to have an understanding of our liberal democracy and how it is that we are one of the wealthiest, most free, most tolerant and most egalitarian countries, which millions have immigrated to. If they don’t learn this, they won’t defend it as previous generations did”.

Politicising teachers and their work in this way influences who comes into the teaching profession – why would high achieving students aspire to teaching as a profession when it is publicly denigrated by the very people who should be our champions and consistently put down by major media outlets over decades?

A study by Associate Professor Nicole Mockler, at the University of Sydney, of media coverage of teachers and the teaching profession in Australia over the last 25 years found it to be overwhelmingly negative.

Assoc. Prof Mockler looked at more than 65,000 articles in the print media and came up with three key findings:

- The articles charted the rise of notions of teacher quality from 2006 – the Rudd-Gillard education revolution – to 2019 – the onset of COVID-19 saw a change in focus. Over that period of time the focus on quality was far more on teachers themselves rather than on teaching approaches, schools, systems, etc.
- Blame was effectively placed on individuals – no system responsibility.
- Media consistently talks about teaching as simple and common sense, implying that all decisions made by teachers are either right or wrong. “Teachers should” is a widely used phrase. No understanding of the number of decisions made by teachers every day (about 1,500) and the range of complexity of those decisions.
- Media stories were disproportionally negative; good news stories easily outnumbered by negative ones about how teachers, individually and collectively, don’t measure up. Add to that the fact that much of the criticism over a long period of time has come from the top – ministers of education – Brendan Nelson, Julie Bishop, Christopher Pyne, Simon Birmingham, the very people charged with supporting the profession instead engaging in teacher bashing. While the research didn’t say so, in my view it’s not a big step to link the change in parent attitudes towards teachers and principals to that sort of public disparagement.

The West Australian reported a few weeks ago the extent of the teacher shortage in WA – 175 secondary school vacancies in September; three times the number for last year and the highest number since 2006.

Primary schools had 141 vacancies compared with 19 this time last year.

Vacancies for school principals were 126 in September, compared with 11 last year at the same time. Principal vacancies have been mostly single digit figures since 2006.

We have reports of student teachers in their second and third years of initial teacher education (ITE) filling in in schools – especially regional schools.

Everyone in this room knows the consequences of these statistics; the stress being experienced by those whose job it is to get someone in front of a class; those who have to repeatedly pick up classes because there are no teachers; everyone who has to deal with disengaged students who are getting increasingly difficult because of constant changes to their routines.

Teachers also know this is not a temporary situation with an easy fix. Consider this quote from a member in response to a recent SSTUWA survey regarding teacher relief:

“We are unable to fill permanent job roles and the load is simply being shared amongst staff as internal relief. Specialist teachers are leaving without replacements, allowing whole programs to end in this country town.”

Or, indeed, this one: “The teacher shortage (and subsequent flow on of workload) has simply reduced the passion for teaching for myself and many colleagues like myself with decades of service. Burn out has increased at an unprecedented level in an attempt at maintaining the system we once had.”

Continued at sstuwa.org.au/SCaddress

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