

Must try harder

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The Government has to articulate a vision for the future

ON the cusp of a federal election, the launch by John Howard of a Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10 will inevitably be seen as an attempt by the Coalition to wrest back control of the education agenda. It would seem no accident that the guide has a foreword by, and a photograph of, the Prime Minister and only a passing reference to Education Minister Julie Bishop.

At the last federal election, the then Opposition leader Mark Latham disastrously misjudged the electorate in spruiking his hit-list of independent schools and seeking to play the politics of envy. Since then, Kevin Rudd and Opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith have shrewdly adopted the Coalition agenda, arguing for higher educational standards and a rigorous national curriculum, and supporting parental choice and public funding of all schools.

Mr Howard's history curriculum announcement is designed to remind parents that it was his Government that has worked to restore a coherent narrative of our national history as a way of creating a generation of better informed citizens. He has tied state education funding to the teaching of Australian history. The challenge, however, will be to ensure that the Australian Education Union doesn't stymie its implementation. The Australian welcomes the new curriculum, which is far superior to the porridge of Studies of Society and the Environment that it replaced. But we question why it has taken the Government 11 1/2 years. The report card should say, "Must work faster".

Mr Howard's announcement of \$2.4 billion to upgrade the Pacific Highway is another unmistakable sign that an election is imminent. He reminded us himself that his previous commitment to the highway was made in 2004, before the last federal election. The fact that the funding won't be made available until 2009-2014, leaves plenty of scope for it to be announced again at the 2010 and 2013 elections. Mr Howard also reminded us that his Government has been dribbling out \$1.3 billion to fix the Pacific Highway ever since he was elected in 1996.

The electorate is tired of this cynical exercise, announcing funds that have been already allocated but won't be spent any time soon, in marginal electorates along the Pacific Highway. The highway should be fixed now. As the recent Business Council of Australia report highlighted, it is also vital to get pricing signals right. Road operators pay only a fraction of the cost to use the road relative to rail operators, yet one train can replace 150 articulated trucks. Subsidising the trucking industry is pushing more heavy trucks on to roads, increasing congestion, road deaths and greenhouse gas emissions.

On the eve of the election, the Government is running out of time. Piecemeal announcements in education and roads are no substitute for a clear and coherent vision.

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