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MEDIA RELEASE

Stephen Smith MP

Shadow Minister for Education and Training

Member for Perth

E&OE

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW, THE NATIONAL INTEREST WITH PETER MARES, ABC RADIO NATIONAL, SUNDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2007

SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN TECHNICAL COLLEGES (ATCs); LABOR'S TRADES TRAINING CENTRES IN SCHOOLS PLAN.

MARES: Stephen Smith, welcome to the *National Interest*.

SMITH: Good morning Peter.

MARES: Good morning to you because you're in Perth of course. Good afternoon!

SMITH: Of course, yes, I'm sorry.

MARES: That's all right. What will you do with these Colleges if Labor wins office?

SMITH: Well, we certainly won't close them down. I've made that point clear. I mean, rule-of-thumb, we'll have about 30 ATCs. They would've signed contracts. There will be tenders and contractual arrangements. So we certainly won't be closing any of them down. That's the first point.

Secondly, but I don't think that it's the best coordination of the Australian Technical Colleges, and the best use of the diverse institutions that we need to get all working together, to get a decent vocational training output for Australia.

We've got effectively 30 stand alone secondary colleges which the Commonwealth, rather than the States, has created. Our central problem is this: we have 2,650 secondary schools throughout the nation. They are either owned, operated, managed by the State and Territory Governments, by the Catholic, and by the Independent school systems and they see about 1.5 million students.

On the Minister's and the Government's own figures, the Australian Technical Colleges will produce less than 10,000 graduates over the next half a dozen years and at the same time we're going to have a skills shortage, again on the Government's own figures, of over 200,000.

We need a much more broadly based approach to confronting our skills crisis than having 30 stand alone ATCs, which the Government did as a political fix, not as a long-term, enduring public policy solution.

MARES: Well, you describe it as a political fix by the Federal Government, but in fact, the point that Jim Barron has made, and others have made this point as well, is that the States were failing on technical and vocational education and the TAFE system was running down. The States weren't putting money in and the Federal Government needed to inject something new to get vocational education happening.

SMITH: Well, we also saw when the Howard Government came to office in 1996, in their first few years, massively slashing the Commonwealth contribution that had previously been going to vocational education and training.

Vocational education and training is one of those areas where we have to have the Commonwealth, the States, the Territories, our schools, our Registered Training Organisations – and Jim Barron’s Group Training Australia organisation represents a lot of those – we’ve got to have everyone working together cooperatively and heading in the same direction.

The reason the Howard Government refused to adequately invest in our TAFE system was driven by ideological blindness. So, what we now see is very many TAFEs, who deal with post-secondary vocational education and training, under-funded. Their infrastructure has depleted, their recurrent investment has not been enough and we’ve got a significant teacher skills set and teacher stock problem with the ageing of our vocational education and training teachers.

This was a political problem for the Government in the run up to the 2004 election. Why did we have a skills crisis? We had a skills crisis as a result of long-term complacency and neglect. It was exacerbated by a minerals and petroleum resources boom to China and the Government had to pretend that it was interested. As we see so often with the Howard Government, it’ll react when it needs to save its political skin, and so this was a good political icon: let’s have 30 Australian Technical Colleges scattered around marginal seats!

MARES: But they’re not all in marginal seats are they? I mean they’re also in places like the Illawarra and Geelong, these are places where trades training is very important. I mean, we heard from the head of the school in Townsville that it’s oversubscribed and where it seems to be a great success?

SMITH: Well, firstly when the Government announced them, there was no coordination between the State and Territory Governments. There was no attempt to sit down and work together cooperatively. That has been the essential difficulty with the Howard Government from day one. Driven by ideological blindness, it refused to deal with the States and it refused to accept that the States had a role in vocational education and training. And despite the Government’s best efforts or worst efforts, depending upon your point of view, TAFEs continue to deal with over 70 per cent of post-secondary training places and over 80 per cent of the hours.

I’ve been to the ATC in Townsville. Firstly, there is a marginal seat in Townsville. But secondly, no one would decry the fact that in Townsville, in North-East Queensland, there are significant skills shortages which we have to address in the long term. The ATC in Townsville, on my impression of visiting there during last week, seems to be working very well and being successful because the entire Townsville community is behind it, which is a point that the ATC Townsville or North Queensland ATC representative made.

That’s because in a town like Townsville, where there is limited critical mass in terms of population and skills set, the local community has to get together. Now, that example is not necessarily replicated in other ATCs which have been dropped into marginal seats in metropolitan areas.

But, let me make this point, the much more substantial point is this, and this is the point that Andrew Robb cannot answer: on the Government’s own figures, we will have a skills shortage of over 200,000 in the next five to 10 years. On the Government’s own figures, we will have less than 10,000 graduates coming from the ATCs. We need a much more broadly based investment in our secondary school vocational education and training streams.

Which is why we’ve committed ourselves to a \$2.5 billion program which will enable all of our secondary schools to have access to it and that will enable up to 1.5 million secondary students to have a taste of trades, or to genuinely have the chance of looking at a vocational training stream.

MARES: But in a sense you’re doing exactly what the Federal Government did in 2004, which, rather than building on the existing TAFE system, you’re duplicating it aren’t you and you’re intervening in State education? How can you hope that, for example, every school is going to be able to offer the kind of range of trades and training that will be needed?

SMITH: Well firstly, let’s not confuse things. TAFEs essentially deal with post-secondary technical education. At the same time, we’ve got to do a couple of things in our secondary schools. We have to lift the standing and the standards of vocational training coming out of our secondary schools. Rule-of-thumb, seven out of 10 secondary schools that I go to, there would not have been a significant investment in manual arts, or commercial cooking, or construction, or automotive workshops for a significant period of time, sometimes going back to the 1970s.

As a nation, we have to make a much greater investment. We’ve got to get the kids in our secondary schools. It’s too

late when they finish secondary school to try and interest them in vocational education and training through a TAFE or another Registered Training Organisation.

We've got to do two things in our secondary schools: raise the standing and the standards of vocational training, but also at the same time, get our secondary school retention rates up. They have stagnated at 75 per cent over the last decade and what all of the evidence, and all of the science, and all of the research tells us is that if we improve our secondary school retention rates, the kids who finish secondary school effectively double their chance of getting a further qualification, including a technical qualification from a TAFE or a Registered Training Organisation, an apprenticeship or going to Uni. And it effectively doubles their chance of being in gainful employment all of their adult working life.

The point I'm making is this: [Audio Break] We need a much more broadly based effort in our secondary schools and we need to have a much better coordinated and collaborative approach when it comes to post secondary arrangements.

MARES: Stephen Smith, thank you very much for your time.

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