

Anne Tolley, Minister of Education

20 June 2009

"Taxpayers should not be funding hobby and recreational courses like twilight golf, radio singalong, pet homeopathy, Moroccan cooking and concrete mosaics," says Education Minister Anne Tolley.

I am Wes Bycroft, an ex Secondary teacher (28 years) and currently employed through 3 income strands: Manager of Oratia Native Plant Nursery, as a consultant with Edtech in IT for schools and playing gigs in a Celtic band.

Over my total career of some 36 years, I have been involved as a night class tutor, first in School Certificate Horticulture, then Basic Computer Skills and currently as a member of our band teaching traditional ceildh dancing with live music. All my classes at Henderson High School have been well attended and as you can see, cover the spectrum from a course designed to provide a qualification through to courses which advance individual and social skills without being attached to a specific qualification.

The students at these courses cover all ages (we have had 4 generations of some families at our ceildh dance classes), all intellectual abilities, a wide range of social sophistication and a wide range of skills. The stand-out thing they have in common is that most are in the lower income bracket and could not afford to learn the skills in any other way. The stand-out outcome for these students is their personal growth over the course.

The quote of yours (NZ Herald: "Lights Out at Night School" Saturday 20 June 2009) repeated above leaves me absolutely astounded. It belittles the participants, the tutors and the heartland communities that show support for any proposed courses by their attendance. No course survives unless attendance is maintained. The market decides.

Your statement smacks of extreme prejudice towards what you see as important for other people to do with their lives. It says the state has no place to play in funding recreational activities.

This is an extraordinary statement given the recent \$20 million that the government has just spent on purchasing wharf areas in Auckland for "Party Central" for the Rugby Cup - and this is just a small part of the spending on that "recreational activity". Oh, but you protest that the Rugby Cup will be "good for the economy"; the returns will far exceed the cost.

Please have the respect to apply the same criteria to Adult Education classes. The following quote is from the NZ Herald article mentioned above:

A Pricewaterhousecoopers' study for ACE Aotearoa estimated the adult education sector's economic impact at between \$4.8 and \$6.3 billion. This equates to a return on investment of \$16-\$22 for each dollar of Government funding, says the 2007 report.

"A key economic benefit is increased income for adult users because of subsequent involvement in paid or higher-paid employment. Benefits were also realised through savings in welfare benefits, crime and health, value added through enhanced community participation and increased taxes."

It noted many participants were from lower socio-economic circumstances so there is "a greater marginal return in improving the outcomes for these adult learners."

Is any "investment" in the Rugby Cup (actually a subsidy for recreational activity) had this kind of estimated return (1600 to 2200% !)?

The New Zealanders who will be able to afford to attend "Party Central" or any of the significant Rugby World Cup games will have to earn well above the average wage to do so. It seems this government Rugby subsidy is aimed at the privileged proportion of society for a recreational activity. When you add the increased support for private schools in the latest budget I can not help but feel reinforced in my view

that the current government is robbing the poor to pay for the rich, using the recession as an excuse to do so.

People of your economic status (and mine) have access to learning all sorts of “recreational activities” without needing to use the night classes because you can afford to buy training privately. By belittling classes with your phrase “twilight golf, radio singalong, pet homeopathy, Moroccan cooking and concrete mosaics” you seem to have lost touch with what life and community is all about. Put Rugby in that list. It is pure prejudice to see crafts or cooking or other recreational activities as worthless to the state.

The Adult Community Education movement in NZ dates back to before 1938 and back then was another area in which NZ was a world pioneer. “Affordable, Accessible, Quality Lifelong Learning” has been a solid, integral part of NZ communities for this long period of time. When times get tough we must reinforce, not cripple such support systems. Current society has fewer forums for promoting group learning and socialising than in the past. Lower paid workers will bear the brunt of the recession. Night classes are an important buffer for helping such people survive mentally and emotionally. Learning new skills in a socially neutral group environment is extremely important for community well-being. Price Waterhouse Cooper’s estimate of its monetary value is enlightening. In the end though, community well-being is more important than the economy.

When our band first decided to run the ceilidh dance night classes I was dubious about their value and popularity. Note that students pay \$5 per 2 hour class for 6 weeks or \$7 for a casual night so they are not entirely free. Whilst we get paid as tutors, the rate is much lower than what we can earn as professional musicians - we do it for other reasons. 8 years of classes later I have no doubt about their significance.

The dances which we teach are social dances mostly Irish or Scottish in origin and danced to live music from those countries. They involve considerable coordination both in individual movement and in the patterns used. So there are many physical and mental skills developed. The dances over 2 hours provide a very useful work-out and considerable mental concentration. You may know some of the dances: Gay Gordon, Walls of Limerick, Dashing White Sergeant, Strip the Willow etc. We provide a relaxed, fun atmosphere and encourage interaction. The numbers have varied between 25 and 80 per night. The ultimate test is the large number of students who reenrol.

The value is best explained by reference to actual students.

- A couple made redundant who are not well coordinated and are slow at learning have become relaxed and proficient and met many new people
- Students of Scottish or Irish ancestry who wish to learn or maintain this aspect of their heritage - many are young couples who are about to marry and want a ceilidh at their wedding
- A mum and autistic daughter: mum is able to have a recreational night out and has improved her fitness and coordination whilst the daughter has gone from noisy temper tantrums and physical assaults on mum and others to being relaxed, amenable and totally hooked on dance
- A young woman recently left by her husband during breast cancer surgery and using the dance as part of her physical and personal rehabilitation
- Families of several generations enjoying learning something new together
- Home-school students with parents meeting the dance requirement of the national curriculum framework in addition to meeting a wide range of people
- Adults in their 70s maintaining their fitness and mental agility
- Older people who have been told by their doctor to exercise to maintain joint mobility
- Musicians from learner to accomplished playing along with the band to improve their skills and experience live performance
- Recent immigrants experience a group activity which improves language and provides a learning context in which they can meet other NZers
- Over-weight students working out in a situation where the fun and concentration mean they are largely unaware of the physical exertion
- Young people enjoying and learning a physical activity in which they associate with adults as equals in terms of the skills
- A man in a wheel chair attended with his wife so they could do something together and she could gain a skill and get out before he died

- Couples who are heading for the UK on a trip coming to learn the traditional dances so they can participate in ceilidhs over there

As a trained scientist and an experienced teacher I have no doubt about the value of what we do. It may be hard to quantify in economic terms but Price Waterhouse Cooper have managed to do so. I just see the gains students make and what it does for a community of real people.

I would encourage you to attend one of our classes, to participate and enjoy. Our last class for term 2 is this Monday, 7.00pm at Henderson High School Hall. Alternatively, as part of the classes we hold a mid-winter ceilidh to which we invite past and present students and their families. This year it is on Saturday 27 June 8.00pm at Henderson High School hall and you are welcome to attend. We no longer hold classes in Term 3 as the numbers are too low during the coldest, wettest months - market forces prevail! However we start again on Monday 12 October for 6 Mondays in Term 4.

I am afraid we will not be able to extend an invitation to you to attend classes in 2010. Unless of course you realise that to terminate the funding for classes such as these is a grave mistake and you reverse the decision.

Contrary to your misguided quote, it is essential that taxpayers continue to fund hobby and recreational courses as well as courses aligned to formal qualifications. There is no doubt that these courses provide an excellent return on the taxpayer dollar spent. They are part of a lauded 70 year tradition in New Zealand to provide affordable, accessible, quality lifelong learning. They fulfil a strong local need. They build relationships, skills and knowledge in grass roots communities. They provide access to relevant courses for the lower paid. They provide valuable community cement in difficult times. Wake up and smell the roses.

Yours sincerely



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