

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 684#

Tanya Plibersek Supports State Aid for Wealthy Scvchools: Mistake!

Although Federal Minister Birmingham admits that wealthy schools are overfunded, and the Grattan Institue has produced a blue-print for more equitable school funding, Tanya Plibersek thinks otherwise.

There is no compelling case to cut funding to "over-funded" private schools and redistribute the money to disadvantaged schools, she says.' It was "absolutely the right decision" for the Gillard government to promise that no school would be worse off under the Gonski funding reforms - a commitment that a Gonski review panelist, Ken Boston, says blew out the cost of the reforms and entrenched inequalities between schools. <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tanya-plibersek-says-no-case-for-cuts-to-overfunded-private-schools-20161201-gt2fl2>

Chris Bonner claims on the John Mendaue blog that the ALP has a long memory, even if it can be selective when it comes to school funding. Along with others the ALP believes that it lost the 2004 election because Mark Latham proposed to take funding from a list of high-fee schools. In more recent times [that belief has been challenged](#), - if anything Latham's 'hit list' assisted him in the polls - but no matter: rusted-on beliefs still reign.

But DOGS suggest that the ALP exercise their memory a little further – back to the days before 1970 when the ALP had some basic principles on State Aid to private schools. These were the days when Bill Hartley was the Secretary of the Labour Party in Victoria and Gough Whitlam, desperate for the Catholic vote, took over the Victorian branch and opened the flood gates of State Aid to all and sundry – including the wealthy – in 1973. Their original “Needs” policy was always a political sham, and as Tanya has finally admitted, it still is.

Even the Coalition is starting to realise that the Catholic vote, and even any religious vote has long since dissipated. Its representatives are in their own vocal but unpopular right wing backbench or wandering off further right. Birmingham, looking at his political future, must be well aware of just how brittle, in the current uncertain economic climate, the private school vote really is

Meanwhile, the State School vote - which incidentally represents the vast majority of Australian parents in both city and country - is still intact. But it is very restless. State school supporters are happy to ditch both major parties.

This public school voting group was efficiently organised by union and parents organisations in the last election. Shorten and Di Natale should appreciate how far it got them when they obtained control of the Senate and one member short in the House of Representatives.

Tanya Pilbersek is diving where she should tip-toe into troubled State Aid waters that have become very murky indeed. Chris Bonner has some interesting thoughts on the subject, but he too has not yet reached the point of understanding **that the only way forward in the school funding debate is to advocate genuine independent schools and withdrawal of State funding from all private educational institutions. Education is a State responsibility and any outsourcing leads to inefficiency, lack of accountability and corruption.** Nevertheless, here is what he has to say:

The ghost of Latham's hit list has rattled around the ALP ever since, spooking anyone who suggests that, even with escalating private school funding, it is a no-no to take a dollar from any school. Julia Gillard went as far as promising that, far from losing a dollar, all schools would gain. That has certainly happened; the 'no losers' have ended up being amongst the biggest winners.

But we have also seen mounting unease about some schools receiving funding increases well ahead of more needy schools, ahead of their Schools Resourcing Standard (SRS) and in ways that almost defy fiscal gravity. One would think that even the most cautious would agree that something must change.

In the political sphere this concession came from an unexpected quarter when the Coalition federal education minister [agreed that some schools might be over-funded](#). Alas, the penny didn't drop with the ALP, instead the ghostly chains just rattled yet again and it seems that everyone has ducked for cover – [led by](#) no less a person than the otherwise highly-regarded deputy and education shadow, Tanya Plibersek.

So what is the ALP game plan here? Surely few in caucus would be comfortable with [serial revelations about highly-funded schools](#). They shouldn't be worried about offending the Catholic school lobby; there aren't many Catholic schools in the high-fee school bracket. Indeed, it is possible Catholic school peak groups and the lower-fee Independent schools might quietly cheer any move to reign-in the level of public funding of these schools.

At one level Tanya Plibersek is right in claiming that it seems like a diversion. The amount of public funding going to these schools isn't as much – figures of between \$3000 and \$6000 per student are common. But even this level of public funding totals anything between one and two billion dollars each year, hardly (in Plibersek's words) a “drop in the bucket”. Much more comes from parents and it is a big total spend – but their students do about the same as similar others in public schools. Should governments contribute to such an inefficient spend-up on advantaged students – when the benefits of investing in the strugglers are well known?

Tanya Plibersek claims that “people find it a compelling thing to talk about but I think it misses the point entirely.” We know the ALP is committed to the final two years of funding, but they seem to have missed many points about school funding, especially the need to establish Gonski's schools resourcing body, a proposal which has been strongly supported in the Grattan Institute's just released [breakthrough strategy](#). Such a body would help iron out the mounting absurdities in the way schools are funded.

Is another missing point the need to guard against large numbers of private schools being funded by governments ahead of similar government schools? Too late: it has already started to happen, even two-year old figures show this. So perhaps we've reached the 'point' where we should acknowledge this is happening and maybe slow down funding increases to schools where it doesn't make any sense? Perhaps the ALP has a plan to ensure that all schools which are similarly funded by governments have similar obligations to the taxpayer that provides the money?

It would be nice to avoid, in Tanya Plibersek's words, being sucked into school against school, system against system, state against state. Again: too late! When the Gonski review reported, we had a chance. But a weird combination of action and inaction by politicians has worsened our sorry state of affairs. The differences between the states in how they support schools are substantial. Our public-private school framework doesn't work – and anyone can see the differences between schools, gaps that are undermining efforts to improve student achievement.

Even in this post-fact world it would be refreshing to see the Government and Opposition respond to overwhelming evidence and help create something better.

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