

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 618#

SIMON BIRMINGHAM: FEDERAL MINISTER FOR EDUCATION WHO IS THIS?

The most, perhaps the only positive thing DOGS can say about Simon Birmingham is that he attended public schools. So, hopefully, he has more idea than most of his Liberal Party colleagues about public education.

That said, there is to date, no evidence of any change of federation education in relation to funding. And the Assistant Minister, Mr Scott Ryan's main interest appears to be Catholic Education. But then, in 2007-8 he was doing research in the Institute of Public Affairs!

Simon Birmingham has indicated concern over the rorts in the private vocational sector, but there is no evidence of his commitment to anything other than the tired Liberal market ideology. Birmingham's plans include pushing for the Commonwealth to take over existing State responsibilities for funding vocational education.

Bill Shorten has identified education, particularly higher education as a key policy battleground for the next election, so Birmingham is following Turnbull – softly softly, with the collaborative consultative rhetoric. But public education supporters should remember the collaborative, consultative approach used by the Labor Party to entice them into the State Aid downward spiral for public education. After all collaboration means the selling out of values. Think second World War and the Nazi collaborators.

'Collaboration' and ' Consultation' are rhetorical concepts of 'friendly' as opposed to ' authoritative' fascism (See B. Gross, *Friendly Fascism* (1982) Boston). Christopher Pyne revealed the true face of neo-Liberal educational policy. Here is what Kelsey Halbert, from James Cook University tells us at <https://theconversation.com/pyne-leaves-education-having-failed-to-sell-a-vision-for-the-past-47849>. Please note that The Conversation believes in Freedom of Information and encourages republication of articles.

Pyne leaves education having failed to sell a vision for the past

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Goodbye education, hello science. AAP/Lukas Coch

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In Sunday's [cabinet reshuffle](#), Christopher Pyne moved out of Education and Training and into the Industry, Innovation and Science portfolio. Pyne's time in education included a review of the [Australian Curriculum](#) and [teacher education](#). He also shifted the view of higher education from a public to a private good.

Pyne [said](#) he was "proud of the achievements" of the last two years. But in a school-style ["report card"](#), education researcher Keith Heggart acknowledged Pyne's efforts but awarded him failing grades for his policies.

Pyne's policies were underpinned by liberal values of the free market, autonomy and education as a private commodity. Why did they attract such opposition?

Fixing schools and teachers

Pyne came to the education portfolio on the back of Labor reforms such as the [Gonski school funding review](#) and roll-out of the Australian Curriculum.

Pyne [retreated from Gonski](#) and rebranded school reform as “Students First”. This included a focus on teacher quality, school autonomy and “strengthening” the curriculum. In January 2014, Pyne announced a [review](#) to:

... evaluate the robustness, independence and balance of the Australian Curriculum.

The review process was contentious and politically motivated. It reignited and cemented Pyne’s place in the [culture wars](#).

On Friday, in one of his final actions as minister, Pyne announced [the changes](#) to the curriculum that would be adopted from the review. He said these changes would tackle overcrowding, boost the teaching of phonics and strengthen references to Western influences in Australia’s history.

Pyne’s push for more recognition of [“Judeo-Christian heritage”](#) and getting back to basics is out of step with the 21st-century Australia that the new Turnbull government is pitching.

While the [New Colombo Plan](#) and the focus on language teaching were to strengthen ties to Asia, the recent changes to the curriculum scrap Asian perspectives. These changes are a step backward, which sidelines the Indigenous knowledge and multicultural values needed for an inclusive global community.

In the [teacher education reforms](#) announced in February, there is an emphasis on improving teacher quality through increased testing and regulation. A modest amount of funding will support this increased scrutiny. But there is no investment in resources or support for future teachers.

University fee deregulation

Pyne’s free-market vision for higher education is the policy that drew the most criticism and public protest. In May 2014, Pyne outlined a [“new vision for higher education”](#) based primarily on fee deregulation. He said that:

Freeing universities to set their own fees, rather than having them dictated by government, will encourage competition between higher education institutions – and that means better courses, better teaching and more competitive course pricing. It will result in a greater focus on students than ever before in Australia.

This vision of competition equals better products met stiff opposition. The policy was one of the big-ticket items of the Abbott government’s first budget. It was a hard sell, with many ramifications for past, present and future students. The policy was [poorly developed and communicated](#).

The Senate has [blocked](#) the changes twice. And despite Pyne claiming he had the sector on his side, organisations such as Universities Australia have a long list of conditions.

On Monday, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten [announced](#) Labor’s higher education policy. It looms as a key battleground for the next election.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull [acknowledged](#) the need to face the “political realities” of the Senate’s opposition to fee deregulation. This has opened the door to further concessions that move away from Pyne’s vision.

Future vision for education

Innovation through science and technology and investing in teacher quality – not just regulating – are important agendas for education. But the transformative potential of school and higher education to prepare Australia for the 21st century requires an alternative vision.

New Education Minister Simon Birmingham was previously the assistant minister for education and training. On Sunday, he [said](#) he looked forward to “working collaboratively” to “build broad support for any future reforms”. These comments indicate an opportunity to nimbly rework the education vision.

Pyne’s legacy in education is a little shaky. Many policies are yet to play out and others have stalled.

What is needed now is a vision of education as more than a private, market-driven product. It is a public good. And the innovation, industry and scientific achievements in Pyne’s new portfolio will come on the back of investment in quality education across all sectors.

- [Fee deregulation](#)
- [Teacher education](#)
- [Christopher Pyne](#)
- [Curriculum review](#)
- [Simon Birmingham](#)
- [Liberal leadership spill](#)

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