

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 710

THE INTERESTING THING ABOUT GONSKI 2.0: THE CATHOLIC SECTOR HAS LOST THE MORAL INITIATIVE WHILE THEIR POLITICAL INITIATIVE IS ALSO UNDER QUESTION

Despite concerted opposition from Labor, public sector unions – and the Catholic lobby, 10 members of the 12-person Senate crossbench announced their intention to support the government's Gonski 2 funding model on the day before the June 21 vote. This enabled to Greens to walk away after gaining considerable concessions for the public sector- and keep faith with teacher union supporters. Gonski 2.0 has now become law.

The government agreed to pump \$5 billion more into schools, fast-track its spending plan and give Catholic schools a 12-month reprieve before removing their prized system-based funding arrangements.

But Gonski 2.0 is a fraud and public school supporters have no reason to be happy about its implementation. As Trevor Cobbold says it entrenches structural incoherence and inequity in school funding at <http://www.saveourschools.com.au/funding/gonski-20-entrenches-structural-incoherence-and-inequity-in-school-funding> and the AEU is far from convinced . They express concern at the long term consequences of the Commonwealth refusing to fund public education to more than 20% . <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/news-media/news/five-things-you-must-know-about-turnbulls-gonski-plan>. Jane Caro in the Saturday Paper suspects Gonski 2.0 will turn out to be a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing funding formula. (*The Saturday Paper*, June 24-30 p.7

How can a funding formula that wants to enshrine in legislation that the federal government will provide 80% of the SRS to private, fee-charging schools be considered either needs based or sector blind? she asks

The only good news for public school supporters is that the Catholic sector, in spite of intense, professionalised lobbying, did not achieve their aim of almost complete system autonomy, with minimal public scrutiny of their skewed funding priorities. The 12 month reprieve, worth \$50 million should help smooth over divisions in the Coalition party room but one can only hope that the fifty year dissembling of the Catholic sector is under threat.

It will now be interesting to watch the politicking of the Catholic sector in coming months. Because that is what it is. The Church has been proven to discard any real attempts to advantage the disadvantaged, instead diverting funds from the needy to the greedy, wealthy Catholic elite schools and new schools in ‘needy’ middle class areas.

One of the many facets of the long-running and increasingly messy fight in Parliament this week over the issue of school funding has been that, like the banks and mining companies before them, the Catholic school sector has sent in former politicians to make the case that their schools are hard done by in the so-called Gonski 2.0 legislation.

No mention has been made of the traditional reasons for the existence of the Catholic system. Instead, the bishops and Catholic Education Commission have employed ex-MPs, most particularly former Labor MP for Macmillan, Christian Zahra. This gentleman is now the head of the National Catholic Education Commission in Canberra.

Research done by journalist, Josh Taylor for the Crikey ‘Insider’ site, indicates that Zahra spent his entire time in Parliament in opposition during John Howard’s tenure and left Parliament in 2004, when he lost his seat to Liberal MP Russell Broadbent. According to his speeches during his time in public office, Zahra has been consistent in his support for both public and private schooling.

Zahra was relatively young when he left Parliament and took on several directorships in the intervening years, most recently leading the indigenous social enterprise organisation Wunan Foundation.

In May this year, Zahra became the executive director of NCEC, taking up his post just a fortnight after the government announced the Gonski 2.0 funding proposal. Given his previous political career, his positioning seems less about getting the government to change its mind and more about shoring up Labor’s opposition, as well as [fronting the media](#) to make the case as to why the Catholic schools would lose out under Gonski 2.0. In announcing his appointment last month, Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, the chairman of the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education, said that Zahra would “speak clearly and passionately on behalf of Catholic school students, teachers and families”.

The other prominent spokesperson for the Catholic schools sector is Stephen Elder. Elder is the executive director of the Catholic Education Office in Victoria. Elder was a state Liberal MP until 1999, but unlike Zahra, he has been involved in the Catholic education sector since departing politics. This is possibly why Elder’s role has been more to front the parliamentary inquiry into the matter, but judging on the reaction he received from Coalition chair Bridget McKenzie, having a former Liberal MP in the position to lobby the government on behalf of the Catholic sector might not be that effective:

Elder: You are relying on a measure that it is flawed, so you keep pushing a public policy which everyone understands when they are talking about — whether it be the Grattan Institute, Gonski or Associate Professor Farish. If the model is flawed, you have to say, ‘This is bad public policy.’ You cannot say, ‘We’re going to give this amount to this school’ when—

McKenzie: Mr Elder, thank you for your commentary. You can hold a press conference after this hearing and go hammer and tongs — absolutely defend your right to do that — but here I am asking the questions.

Elder has a history of lobbying outside of the education sector, as well. In 2014 [he lobbied then-minister Kevin Andrews](#) to get rid of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (which the government did not scrap). Now dumped from the ministry, Andrews has been one of the most vocal opponents on the backbench against the Gonski 2.0 funding arrangement for Catholic schools.

The Catholic sector has long since lost the moral initiative in the education debate – if they ever had it. It appears that their political push and pull may also have its limits.

Public school supporters are fed up with lies, lies and manipulated statistics. But they should be thankful for small mercies.

It appears that the old moralising arguments have given way to power play pure and simple.

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