

# **AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

## **Press Release 970**

### **CHRIS BONNER ON RATIONALIST SOCIETY WEBINAR: HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE BUT REASONING FLAWED**

On 22 February 2023 Chris Bonner, a retired NSW school Principal, a supporter of ‘Save our Schools’, and established author on public education and schools funding gave an address to the [Rationalist Society Webinar](#). He argued that Australia’s education system needs a common framework of responsibilities and obligations to ensure that all publicly funded schools are accessible to all children. He argued further that such a new framework would help address declining achievement and growing disadvantage between public schools and the Catholic and Independent systems. S. Gladman, from the Rationalist Society, summarised his speech as follows:

Bonner argued for the full public funding of all schools, the removal of fees and discriminatory enrolment practices that have sorted children based on socio-economic differences – a proposal put forward in his 2022 book, [Waiting for Gonski: How Australia failed its schools](#), co-authored with Tom Greenwell.

He said congregating disadvantaged children in free public schools and children from wealthier families in private schools was contributing to declining education outcomes, with negative peer effects and resource discrepancies impacting students in the public system.

“We need a common framework of responsibilities and obligations to ensure that all publicly funded schools are accessible to all kids,” he said.

“A common public framework could support choice without creating social and economic segregation. At no cost families could access schools that reflect their values and preferences, and schools would no longer be defined by who they enroll and by who they reject. Taxpayer funding would no longer provide some students and schools with privileges not available to others.

“[A common framework] addresses the root causes of declining achievement and growing disadvantage for our schools because we would be no longer gathering the disadvantaged together in the schools that are free, or currently free.”

Bonner said adopting such a solution would essentially amount to “admitting defeat” for the campaign for a secular publicly funded education system – a battle, he argued, that was lost half a century ago.

“Unless we put that to one side, we’re going to lose much more in the coming decades. The social class and student achievement divides in Australian schooling are increasing year by year. And this shows up in My School data.”

He conceded that the proposal to fully fund religious schools would raise many questions, especially around ensuring compliance with a common framework, but warned of the costs of further inaction.

“[With the book] we wanted to kick the door open to a conversation about solutions and to invite others that have solutions to put them forward – don’t keep ignoring the problem. Start adding up the gains and losses of going in other directions, and, most of all, the cost of doing nothing, because nothing is what happens right now. And the real costs, including to kids, is mounting.”

### **DOGS COMMENT:**

Bonner, like so many well meaning educationists in the last seventy years, has a good heart and is concerned for the disadvantaged children in schools throughout Australia. The failure of various incarnations of the Whitlam’s 1973 ‘Needs’ policy haunts their endeavours. But Bonner persists in treading this path. He sincerely believes that the class, creed or colour or even the sexual orientation of parents should not in any way hamper the educational opportunities of their offspring. Yet he wishes to negotiate with systems where discrimination against children and employees are their *raison d’etre*.

Bonner’s reasoning, his acceptance as opposed to confrontation of the religious lobby has led him to the wrong conclusion. For any public funding of private schools that select children is an acceptance of the principle that undermines that underlying the public system.

Public schools , to be public, must be

- Public in purpose
- Public in outcome
- Above all, Public in access
- Public in ownership
- Public in control
- Public in funding
- And consequently the only ones that can be public in accountability.

In the current situation, Australian private schools fulfil only one of these criteria. They are public in funding. If as Bonner suggests, they are given full public funding and forced to enrol local children, they will fulfil only two of the above criteria, namely, they will be public in funding and access. But they will not be public in purpose, outcome, ownership, control or accountability. Given the political power of the private school lobby, Bonner is perhaps putting on his rosy coloured spectacles if he believes that they will ever be public in access.

Bonner is also a bit defeatist in his reluctance to confront the private sector, most particularly the religious education lobby. He should perhaps take heart from the efforts of his nineteenth century public education supporters, as well as

the determination of the Gay liberation lobby along with their confrontation of those who practice discrimination in this country.

**DOGS believe the only way forward for public education in Australia is public funding for only genuinely public schools.**

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