



**LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION  
THE HON. TONY ABBOTT MHR  
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR WARRINGAH**

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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE HON. TONY ABBOTT MHR  
ADDRESS TO THE ASSOCIATION OF HEADS OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS OF  
AUSTRALIA AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COUNCIL OF  
AUSTRALIA NATIONAL FORUM,  
CANBERRA**

E&OE.....

*[Start of recording]*

I've got to say that I have been very lucky as a human being in the education that I have received. Starting off at school – Holy Family Convent, Saint Aloysius' College, Saint Ignatius' College and then at Sydney University, Oxford University, and St Patrick's College, Manly – I have been very personally lucky in those who have educated me.

Next to my father, the person who I believe has had the most influence on my life, so far as least, was one of my teachers, the extraordinary Jesuit, Father Emmet Costello, who may well be known to some of you in this room. I recall as a strapping adolescent in Year 11 joking with the slender scholar in the playground and I said to Father Emmet, 'you know, Emmet, I'm so strong that I could pick you up and put you in my top pocket' and the distinguished Jesuit said, 'yes and if you did that you'd have more brains in your top pocket that you've got in your head'. So, I learned early on not to match wits with teachers!

I recall another one of my teachers, Mr Joe Castley, the famous English master from Riverview College saying to his class before our long summer holidays that we couldn't waste the time playing and doing all the other things that adolescents did. We must spend our holidays at least in part usefully by reading, he said, "with voracious appetites". From that day to this, that is a phrase that constantly echoes around my head, "we must read with voracious appetites" and one of the regrets of my current life is that I don't have nearly enough time to read the things that matter as opposed to the things that are merely urgent.

So, I have been lucky in my education and I wish for every single Australian child that he or she is also lucky and blessed in his or her education.

I think that both as an individual and as a politician, I have demonstrated that my concern for education is a fact, not merely a theory and that my concern for education extends to a good education for all of us, not just a good education for some of us.

I've just come back from the Aurukun school, a place where I spent ten days as part of the truancy team in 2009. I've just been up there as something that we've dubbed the CEO working bee, where along with a number of Australia's senior corporate leaders, we put a bit of "sweat equity" into refurbishing the library so

that the kids at that school would know that learning and reading should be something that is valued by them but also by the wider Australian community.

Margie and I have actively chosen schools for our own children – first, Our Lady of Good Counsel in Forestville, where Margie was an office bearer on the Parents and Friends for several years, and later Monte Sant' Angelo School at North Sydney. I think my party has a very strong record when it comes to support for independent schools. You will remember that early in the life of the Howard Government we abolished the new schools policy that made it so difficult for new independent schools to start up and we increased school funding by almost 80 per cent in real terms over the life of the Howard Government.

Yes, funding for independent schools has continued to increase under the current government but that is because the current government has simply continued the funding arrangements that the former government put in place. There are four fundamental principles which animate the Coalition that I lead. We support choice. We want to encourage private investment. We think that school funding should be based on need and we also think that it should be based on objective data – choice, private investment, need, and objective data; they are the principals on which we want to base decisions about school funding.

Now, there are two issues which are currently in contention. The first, can the SES funding model be improved? Like all sensible politicians we're always happy to listen to ideas about how existing arrangements can be improved. I've got to say that so far there is nothing substantial, nothing concrete, that we have seen that we are confident would be an improvement on the SES funding model that the Howard Government put in place. The second issue which is currently in contention, the issue which underlay the whole Gonski process, is should the Commonwealth have a greater role in funding state schools?

I think the whole Gonski process was at least in some sense generated by this thought that the Government somehow neglects public schools because the Commonwealth, as we know, is the major funder of independent schools, while the states are the major funder of public schools. It's true that if you simply look at Commonwealth school funding there appears to be an imbalance, but surely the first duty of any serious public policy advocate is not to look at things in such an out of context way.

Overall, independent school pupils receive under 70 per cent of the total – that is to say state and Commonwealth funding – of a public school student. Overall, the 66 per cent of Australian school students who attend public schools get 79 per cent of government funding; for 34 per cent of Australians who attend independent schools get just 21 per cent of government funding. So, there is no question of injustice to public schools here. If anything, the injustice is the other way.

The risk from the Gonski process is that greater Commonwealth funding for public schools might mean less Commonwealth funding for independent schools and I have to say that it would be the hope of many in the union movement, for instance, who don't like the greater freedom to manage staff, the greater freedom to run schools which independent schools have traditionally had; that there is in fact a major shift of Government funding from independent to public schools, even though already 79 per cent of overall Government funding goes into state schools.

When it comes to Gonski, all of us obviously support better state schools and all of us obviously support better independent schools and in a better world all of us would want to see the funding for both types of schools increased.

The challenge in the fiscally constrained environment that both Commonwealth and State Governments currently face, is to ensure that changes in policy don't end up robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The problem, ladies and gentlemen – as all of you would know because I'm sure all of you were conscious of the material in the papers on the weekend – is that even if Gonski is fully-funded to the tune of some \$5 billion more a year, it seems that some one in three schools would be worse off; and these are both public

and private schools that would be worse off. This is based on modelling done by the Independent Schools Council and by state governments.

The fact that the Government pulled what was to have been its response to Gonski demonstrates and confirms that there are problems with things as they stand. At the very least, I think the Government should immediately release its own modelling of the impact of Gonski, if only so that the scale of the challenge policy-makers face can be fully exposed.

I have to say to you, ladies and gentlemen, that while I am strongly supportive of reasonable steps to boost funding in education and while I am deeply desirous of better schools, both independent and state schools, I am deeply sceptical that Gonski is doable at this time, given all the other fiscal demands that state and Commonwealth governments face.

If we look at the demands that the Commonwealth is currently facing – extra border protection costs, extra spending on the National Disability Insurance Scheme, just to take two – and then the determination to maintain a slender surplus, the idea that another \$5 billion a year might be forthcoming for Gonski, including \$2 billion from the Commonwealth, let alone the additional \$1.5 billion at least to ensure that under Gonski no school is worse off, the idea that this kind of money is just lying around waiting to be spent at this time, if I may say so, defies common sense.

My fear is that the Government is keen to make an impression without actually delivering on the improvement that it's promising. My fear is that the Government is seeking to get credit for a reform, the costs of which will largely be left to the States. The only way, ladies and gentlemen, right now to ensure that no school is worse off is, I believe, to stick with the existing system. In the absence of certainty that no school will be worse off, including indexation, in the absence of a clear demonstration of where any additional funding is coming from, I believe that organisations such as yours would be best advised to stick with what we've got.

I want to make a couple of additional points before I sit down. First, it is the strong view of the Coalition that NAPLAN data should not be used in any funding formula for schools. Second, there should be no requirement that schools publish their asset values on the *MySchool* website. It is very important that information is used for right purposes and the right purpose of NAPLAN data is to know how our kids and schools are going academically. It's not to determine funding and the right purpose of the *MySchool* website is to enable parents to make an informed choice. It is not to drive funding policy.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by saying that I deeply respect the work that you're doing. I deeply admire the vocation of teaching. As I said at the beginning, every single one of us – for better or for worse, but overwhelmingly for better – are the product of the education that we have received. We are the product of the love and insights and professionalism and decency that the teachers that we have had over the years have lavished upon us.

I stand before you, yes, as the leader of Liberal Party and of the Coalition. Of course, that's my title. But I stand before you as a proud Australian, as a product of the independent school system, as someone who believes that I can say with deep conviction that I am a friend of the independent schools of Australia. I know them intimately. I am a friend of the independent schools of Australia and I think that you can judge me by my deeds and not simply by my words.

Thank you so much. It is great to be here. I hope you have a good conference.

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