

## OPINION

# Gonski: Pressure cooker politics

**Opinion by ISCA Executive Director Bill Daniels**

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Canberra's political soup is heating up, so much so that last week it threatened to boil over. Internal party politics aside, it is the Government's self-imposed election deadline that is helping to raise the temperature. An election date of 14 September means the Government has only until 27 June 2013 to pass legislation, including legislation to cover federal funding of schools beyond 2013.

A new schools funding model delivering the kind of increased public investment recommended by the Gonski report will depend on the Prime Minister bringing on board the state and territory governments. For this, she has set a target date of 19 April, the next meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). That's just over three weeks away, and still no details of the proposed funding model have been made public.

Impending deadlines and a scarcity of information have led to a flurry of speculation that the Prime Minister has brokered a 'deal' with the independent schools sector. Wrong. There is no deal. For one thing, the Independent Schools Council of Australia has no authority to make deals for independent schools. Independent schools are just that, independently owned and governed, and it is up to each school to accept or reject any funding proposal offered by the Government. What ISCA does on behalf of the sector is to act as a policy watchdog, and advise governments of the sector's response to policy proposals.

What is true are claims that ISCA has been pressing the Government for details of its reforms and was prepared to break a confidentiality agreement with the Government unless more detail was forthcoming.

It's also true that as a result of that pressure we met with the Prime Minister on 14 March. We did not come away from that meeting with a 'deal'. We did come away assured that the Prime Minister has heard the message we have delivered consistently since the Gonski review was commissioned way back in 2010: in the transition to a new funding model, no independent school should lose funding in real terms. But as yet there is no detail about how the Government might interpret that assurance within a funding model.

We are also assured that the Government is fully cognisant that a school is not just a building, that it is a community. There are 1017 independent schools in Australia, enrolling 511,000 students. Standing behind those schools and students are families who are digging deep into after-tax incomes to help pay for their children's education.

In the independent sector, parents are big contributors to both recurrent and capital costs in independent schools. On average, they contribute more to their children's education than federal and state governments combined. Looking at the combined non-government sector, of both independent

and Catholic schools, governments would have to find another \$8.4 billion annually to replace parental contribution to recurrent costs alone.

Given the difficulty of finding the extra \$6.5 billion annually that has been floated as the cost of the Gonski reforms, it makes sense for a Government struggling to balance its budget to recognise and encourage parental contribution. There are political considerations as well. Parents are an electoral force to be reckoned with, especially in marginal seats, and families have already voted with their feet on the issue of school choice. A third of Australia's school students are educated in non-government schools, and that proportion grows the higher the year level. By Year 12, two out of every five students has had at least some part of their education in a Catholic or independent school.

Parents and school owners are not the only stakeholders pressing claims on the Government. Teacher unions, churches and other religious bodies, teacher educators and academics, and groups representing students with a disability, indigenous students and rural and remote students all have strong voices. And, unlike many other areas of public policy, most voters have been to school and as a consequence have an opinion on schools and school funding.

It all makes for a potent political brew. The Government has set its timer. It must now keep a very close watch on the Gonski pressure cooker if it is to successfully deliver school reforms that are edible. ● ● ●