

The Australian Labor Party and the “Gonski” school funding fraud

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Of the innumerable lies promoted during the Australian election campaign, Labor’s claim to be a champion of the public education system is among the most shameless.

In the first week of the campaign last month, Labor leader Bill Shorten declared the election would be “a referendum on the future of education in this country.” He has since made the no less bogus claim that the election is a “referendum on Medicare”—but education remains a prominent issue on which the opposition is seeking to gain ground against Malcolm Turnbull’s government.

Labor has promised to maintain a version of the “Gonski” school funding model over the next decade, touting a headline \$37 billion funding increase over this period.

Shorten’s claims have been backed by the Greens, which likewise promotes the “Gonski” model. The Australian Education Union (AEU) enthusiastically endorsed Labor’s campaign, and attempted to mobilise teachers to doorknock in closely-contested electorates around the country, urging a vote for “Gonski.”

These campaigns aim to capitalise on the widespread confusion among ordinary people over what exactly the Gonski school funding model comprises.

There are two central aspects to Gonski—firstly, a promise of a future increase in school funding, and secondly, the immediate imposition of regressive measures undermining teachers’ job security and professional autonomy. The former aspect of Gonski is consistently and deliberately misrepresented, while the latter aspect has been covered up by Labor and the education trade unions.

The Gonski model’s origins lie in an inquiry commissioned by then Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2012. Carried out by David Gonski,

prominent businessman and chairman of the Australian Stock Exchange, the inquiry noted that Australia has one of the most unequal education systems of all the advanced capitalist countries, with extreme segregation of high- and low-income students at different schools. Gonski proposed to allocate government funding to schools based on a set sum per student, with additional payments for students falling into one of five categories: in remote locations, in schools with a high proportion of indigenous children, from low socio-economic backgrounds, with limited English proficiency, and with a disability.

Gillard immediately dismissed the inquiry’s recommendation that an additional \$5 billion annually be injected into the school system. Her education minister, Peter Garrett, declared that the “most important thing” was to return the budget to surplus.

Instead, in 2013, Gillard cynically declared her support for a revised Gonski model. This involved slashing \$2 billion in government funding for universities, while issuing a blanket promise that there would be no reduction in the lavish public funds funnelled into private schools, including the wealthiest elite institutions. Gillard pledged just \$14.5 billion for the school system over six years.

The vast majority of this money was allocated for the end of the six-year period. Gillard postured as the saviour of the public school system, while allowing her successors, either Labor or Liberal-National, ample room to abandon the spending scheduled to come after two federal elections. This is what duly happened. When the Liberal-National government took office in 2013, it quickly announced it would not continue the Gonski funding after 2017.

Bill Shorten has now revived Gillard’s cynical grandstanding on education funding.

He has boasted of preparing to boost school funding by \$37 billion—but less than 2 percent of this (\$700 million) will be spent in the next two years if Labor wins the election. In 2018 and 2019, another \$4.5 billion will supposedly be allocated, with the remainder of the \$37 billion spread annually up to the year 2025. All this proposed spending—itsself grossly inadequate compared to the real needs of a crisis-stricken public school system—is so much hot air in an era of bipartisan commitment to austerity spending cuts.

While Shorten’s planned school funding is a fraud, his plans for regressive new measures against public school teachers are immediate and real.

In this, the Labor leader is again following in Gillard’s footsteps. She used Gonski as a cover to tie school funding to numerous conditions that included so-called school improvement schemes and annual teacher “performance reviews” that have confronted public school teachers targeted for removal with Orwellian administrative sanctions carried out by principals and AEU bureaucrats working in tandem.

Labor’s policy now declares that school funding “is not a blank cheque—it comes with strict obligations and benchmarks on systems, schools and teachers ... school funding is an investment, and we want to see the best possible return for every student, and as a country.”

Shadow education minister Kate Ellis has accused the Liberal-National Coalition government of believing in “no strings attached funding to our schools—that will not continue under Labor.” She added: “This is about restoring accountability and transparency ... What we need to do is invest in evidence-based policies, spend more money on the programs which we know make a difference and stop spending money on those that don’t.”

This is all code for an extension of the US-style assault on public education that lay at the very heart of the former Rudd and Gillard Labor governments’ “education revolution.” Public schools deemed “underperforming,” especially those in working-class areas, will be targeted for amalgamation or closure. Teachers will be victimised and targeted for dismissal for alleged failures to boost students’ standardised test scores.

Labor’s references to “benchmarks,” “returns on investment” and “evidence-based policies” are terminology drawn from the corporate world, reflecting

the underlying agenda behind the assault on public education. The entire school system, instead of being oriented toward children’s intellectual, cultural and creative development, is being more and more closely geared to the demands of big business and finance capital.

The entire ruling elite regards public education as an unacceptable drain on the budget. Australia’s polarised education system will worsen further, regardless of whether Labor or the Coalition wins the July 2 election. Public schools will remain grossly underfunded, increasingly serving as holding pens for the poorest layers of the working class, while private schools receive an ever-greater share of government spending.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that free access to a high quality public education is a universal social right. But, like all the social rights of the working class—such as to a job, a liveable income and access to free health care—the right to education immediately conflicts with the agenda of finance capital and the ultra-wealthy oligarchy that exercises a dictatorship over economic and political life. Securing universal access to first-class education, from kindergarten to university, requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class based on socialist and internationalist principles to abolish the capitalist system.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our web site or Facebook page.

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