

Speech notes.
ACSSO Conference
14th October, Sydney

Topic: Beyond Gonski

Lyndsay Connors AM FACE

I want to thank ACSSO for inviting me to speak on the important topic of 'Beyond Gonski'.

I was pleased to be invited for two reasons – the first is about old ties. I was the ACSSO Information Officer from 1981 to 1983, when the political tensions around schools funding had similarities with the circumstances today.

From the standpoint of public schooling, however, I am sad to say that the problems today are more entrenched; schools funding policy settings are more radical; and the challenges confronting the public school system are now more acute. I find it almost beyond belief that Australia has drifted over those years towards the policy scenario once described by the OECD as being suitable for countries with a high tolerance of inequality.

The second reason I am pleased to be asked is the importance of the topic – Beyond Gonski. I want today to reinforce the importance of the Gonski Review of Schools Funding and of what might lie beyond it. I want to share with you, as parents/citizens, what I see as the realities of our situation in relation to schools funding policy; and the sense of concern and anxiety that they evoke. And I want to emphasise the need for a commitment to the thought and action that will be needed, beyond Gonski, on the part of all those who value the vision of a strong and socially representative public school system, secular and free.

I believe we should all be prepared to state clearly the values that underpin the views we put forward publicly. There are beliefs, philosophies, ideals, values behind all positions and it is best to be open about them. (We tend to call them values when they're beliefs we share; if we don't share them, we tend to call them 'ideological' positions.)

Maybe because of the particular circumstances of my early life, and in common with so many others in this country, I feel strongly the personal debt I owe to those who fought for compulsory schooling and for a system of public, free, secular public schools.

As Henry Parkes said, at the opening of a public school in Sydney over 140 years ago,

... a Public school system in any country is an essential part of its institutions in the large sense of politics. It is part of the policy of the country. It is part of the intention and action of the Government; part of the very life of constituted authority.

But Australia is not just any country. We are a democracy, and we should have schools funding arrangements fit for a democracy, as Parkes made clear in his closing remarks that day, in the context of the move towards Federation:

... Let us by every means in our power take care that the children of the country grow up under such a sound and enlightened system of instruction, that they will consider the dearest of all possessions the free exercise of their own judgment in the secular affairs of life, and that each man will shrink from being subservient to any other man or earthly power.

Australia is not an oligarchy, an aristocracy, or a theocracy. We need a system of funding schools based on the values of liberty, solidarity and equality, so that it contributes to the maintenance and advancement of our democratic way of life.

We hear much these days of parents' personal decisions about their own children's education and, in particular, of financial costs that these may involve. But, like John Dewey, I believe that it is a very poor parent that would not lie down in the street in support of a fine education for the children of other people, with whom their own will share the world.

The Gonski Review

The funding review with its eminent panel headed by David Gonski was set up in April last year by the then Rudd Government to examine the fairness, efficiency and effectiveness of schools funding arrangements in Australia.

Its task is clear in one sense, in that there is widespread agreement that the current schools funding arrangements in Australia are in need of comprehensive reform.

In another sense, it has an unenviable task, since it is dealing with an inherited set of schools funding arrangements that have almost taken on a life of their own, separate from considerations of educational values, goals and priorities. These are arrangements so entrenched in chronic and deep-seated political divides that they now constitute what political scientists call “a wicked problem”.

If we take these arrangements as a whole, it can reasonably be argued, in my view, that they are arrangements for which nobody knowingly voted.

Nobody knowingly voted for a proposition that the separation between public and non-government schools should be expressed (somewhat like a marital separation or divorce) by awarding custody of one lot of children, those attending non-government schools, to the high income parent, the Commonwealth; and the custody of the majority of the children, those attending public schools, to live on what the States could afford – rather like the parent reliant on supporting parents’ benefits combined with a bit of child maintenance.

Nobody voted to progressively reduce the proportion of students attending public schools; or to subsidise the movement of children from better-off families out of the public system in return for the movement of their less privileged peers into the public system.

Nobody ever voted for the proposition that it would make good sense for Australia, which sits around the middle of OECD countries ranked in terms of per capita investment in schooling, to slide down to become the third-lowest in the developed world in terms of the public funding it allocates to

public schools; and fourth highest in terms of the share it allocates to non-government schools¹.

Yet all of this has gradually happened...these are now realities.

The Gonski Review panel has published a set of commissioned research papers, and submissions to the Review are listed on the website.

We do not know what the Review panel itself is thinking and it is not clear what it is making of the research and the submissions – nor is the form known of its final report due at the end of this year. Will it in the form of a draft for consultation or final advice to government?

And, of course, it will be governments, and primarily the Commonwealth Government, that makes the critical decisions.

But the findings of the Gonski Review matter. It is the most significant opportunity for several decades to lay down a blueprint for building a rational connection between education policy and the public investment needed to implement that policy.

It is wise to live life poised between hope and fear - hoping and working for the best – fearing and preparing for the worst.

So we look to the Gonski Review to give advice to government that will lead to the conditions most likely to achieve our finest hopes. I hope that it will ask the questions that need to be asked, and then answered, if we are to have any hope of defending and advancing the quality and strength of public schooling in this country.

Of course, along the way, there are nasty shocks from time to time that remind us that one person's hopes are another person's fears. I well recall a wave of shock when, during the 1980s, I heard a former head of another parent organisation refer in a public forum to the institution of the public school as "the freebie down the road".

¹ Patty, A. "Bad mark on school funding", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 September, 2010.

Henry Parkes's vision (not always attained in reality) was of education as a social contract, a public space where social norms and values such as reciprocity, mutuality and altruism prevail; not a space governed by market norms of competition and choice where you get what you pay for, or rather what your parents pay for.

And I was also taken aback in 2007, when the then Prime Minister of this country, a personal beneficiary of public schooling, described the fundamental value and strength of public education as being "the safety net and guarantor of a reasonable quality education in this country"²; which he contrasted with the US system where the 'schools at the bottom level were appalling'.

I am now finding that advancing age does not bring with it the immunity I had hoped for from ongoing shocks of this kind.

A few weeks ago I was at an education dinner function here in Sydney when a man sitting next but one on my left announced that 'this Gonski Review is a real worry'. Naturally, I was intrigued and I bent forward to catch his drift.

When asked by the chap next to him what he meant, he said that he would not like to 'verbal' the Gonski panel and would, therefore, quote their actual words.

He reached down into his briefcase and then brandished what I later was able to identify as the Emerging Issues Paper released by the Gonski Review late last year

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/Pages/EmergingIssuesPaper.aspx>.)

"Listen to this" he said. "This is what it says". "It says that 'equity should ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. ...

² These comments were made by John Howard, following a formal speech, in the context of outlining his dislike of the idea of vouchers as a funding mechanism for schools in the new market model. "Vouchers not an option in the new market model", by Catherine Armitage, *The Australian*, May 16, 2007).

To place this quotation in context, it came from the following section of the Emerging Issues Paper:

To provide a basis for discussion in the community, the panel feels it important to state its focus of considerations of equity for the review. It believes that equity should ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. The panel does not intend it to mean that all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes, but rather that they will not be prevented from achieving their maximum potential because of their background or family circumstances (p5).

“Yes”, I said. “Is there a problem with that?”

“It’s Marxism”, he said.

I found it fascinating to contemplate that a committee comprised of one of Australia’s most powerful businessmen and University of NSW Chancellor, a former Premier of WA, a former Deputy Chancellor at Bond University, a former head of the Productivity Commission and a former Vice Chancellor of the Catholic University of Notre Dame – not to mention the former Director-General of Education and Training in NSW – could be the architect of a Marxist plot.

But, of course, it isn’t Marxist –it is expressing a democratic ideal. It is about the idea that we are all born equal and all equally entitled to a fine education. But I have had a few examples recently where principles or values that we would once have seen as being mainstream democratic are now regarded as seriously left-wing, or Marxist.

We have to be sensible here...as far as I know, there are few or no societies, regardless of their system of government, where differences in wealth, income, power and possessions do not have an influence on educational opportunities and achievement.

But, in a democracy, we believe that however endemic or ‘natural’ this state of affairs may be, this does not make them good or right. Few societies are free from racism, sexism, abuses of power of all kinds, but this does not

mean we embrace them or yield to them – or go out of our way to reinforce them through public policy.

The argument here is about the role of government. Is it really the role of government simply to accept that we have a school system where educational opportunities and achievement are significantly dependent on wealth, income, power and possessions, let alone to take active steps - through the way it invests public funding in schooling - to create such a system.

For my own part, I feel no desire to have my dinner companion stripped of whatever wealth, income, power and possessions he appeared to be so vigorously defending. He can keep them all. As far as I'm concerned, he can use them all to buy whatever education he wants for his own children. He can even use these advantages to help his children's school offer financial and other incentives to attract well qualified teachers away from other schools where they may be teaching students whose parents lack the same level of wealth, income, power and possessions.

But I am relying on both the Gonski Review and the government response to it to ask the question of whether we should be spending public funding to strengthen that particular expression of market power at the expense of meeting agreed educational goals for all. Should not the priority for democratic governments be to secure the interests of those children who lack the protective benefits of family wealth or power – through no fault of their own?

Of course, nobody states openly that they think we should have a school system that entrenches and broadens the gaps in outcomes that reflect wealth, income, power and possessions.

(Well...over the years there have always been some who do. In the very year – 1879 - when Henry Parkes was introducing his Public Instruction Bill and provision for high schools in New South Wales, a certain Mr Downer was striking a very different note in South Australia. A lawyer and one of that State's largest landowners, Mr Downer pronounced that to provide high schooling for people who had no business with it was interfering with the very laws of nature³. Giving secondary education to the children of the

³ Miller, P. *Long Division. State Schooling in South Australian Society*. 1986.

working class was to him as silly “as providing jam tarts to the inmates of destitute asylums”.)

But while such sentiments would not be expressed these days in a submission to the Gonski Review, there are certainly those prepared to defend funding arrangements that have the effect of entrenching and broadening resource gaps for which there is no educational justification.

The idea that the Gonski Review has taken up a Marxist position on schools funding is clearly absurd. And it would be no less absurd to believe that the circumstances with which the Gonski Review panel is dealing are the outcome of a conspiracy. Of course, if they were, then it would certainly not have been a conspiracy of the Marxist kind!

Let us be very clear. Nobody ever said “We’ve heard of countries that have class stratified school systems – why don’t we do all we can, through the way we give public funding out to schools, to achieve that here”.

Nobody said in the 1970’s “Oh, the national government is allocating 68 per cent of its total investment in schooling to the public schools that are open freely to all; and 32 per cent to non-public schools. Why don’t we see if we can find some policy principles and funding formulae to reverse that?”

Yet that is what has happened over the years and under successive governments.

The historical background to the evolution of public funding for schools is well described – in a sanitised form suitable to a public report - in the Allen Consulting Group report⁴ commissioned by the Gonski panel (pp17-23).

What has really happened to produce our current schools funding arrangements is the outcome of a set of circumstances unique to this country. These include the vagaries of our Federal system, the Labor split in the 1950s, the political deals between political parties and, mainly, Catholic authorities, the changing economy, the real estate market, our history, demography and ethnic composition – and the politics of marginal seats, These are all parts of a story which has led to public schools generally, and those public schools serving the poorest communities in particular, being

⁴ <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/ReviewofFunding/Documents/ACG-FeasibilityofaNationalSchoolingRecurrentResourceStandard.pdf>

positioned as the poor relations, mostly under-funded for the teaching workload they are required to carry.

I know that our schools funding arrangements are not the result of a grand, coherent conspiracy. But they are so radical in character, seen from the standpoint of those of us who share the belief that one of the hallmarks of a democracy is a strong and socially representative public school system, that they could just as well have been.

As was pointed out by Doherty, McGaw and O’Loughlin in 2004, “Australia is unique in the extent to which non-government schools are able to combine private resources with government funding to achieve a substantial advantage over the public system.” (‘Level the learning field’, *The Australian* 304/2004).

Australia’s schools funding arrangements are radical in terms of international practice. They provide the public funding that covers the full costs of teaching staff in government schools. But they also provide public grants to most non-public schools on a scale more than sufficient to cover the full costs of their teaching staff also; and allow for these to be combined with income from unregulated private fees. These fees are what largely determine the price of access to these schools.

Whether or not it was my dinner companion’s hint at the imagined Marxist tendencies of the Gonski Review Panel that set me off, I found myself thinking that it is far easier to envisage a scenario where our current arrangements could well have been the product of a neo-liberal plot.

In fact, I want to invite you to imagine such a thing – simply as a way of taking a fresh look and gaining a clearer understanding of the pressures to which public schooling has been subjected in this country.

I invite you to suspend your disbelief for a moment, and to imagine that among the various education policy tourists that visited our shores during the 1970s, was one fictitious character – we’ll call him Dr Milton F Stealth. Imagine him as a lesser known US economist and an early proponent of the neo-liberal politics and economics that have since had an influence here and overseas. These are characterised by arguments for reducing the role of governments, and increasing reliance on market-based competition and the commodification of services to achieve policy outcomes.

Now go on to imagine that Dr Stealth belonged to a small cell of fellow neo-liberals - alarmed by the mounting public costs of meeting expanding educational aspirations post WWII and anxious to reduce the role of governments generally in funding and providing such services. Imagine that this small group hears about the steps being taken by the Whitlam Government in Australia to extend significant public funding to non-government schools, to achieve a political 'settlement' of sectarian divisions and on grounds of equity and the entitlement of all students to a decent standard of schooling.

Australia starts to sound interesting to Dr. S and his friends – a possible beachhead, in fact – a place to plant the seeds that might, over time, minimise the responsibility of government for the full funding and direct provision of public schooling. Australia's attraction to such a group would have been that it already has a large, private school system – the Catholic system of parish schools that are a result of its history - as well as a much smaller group of prestigious and largely well-endowed and socially exclusive, mainly Protestant, church schools. Here was a chance to build an alliance of powerful class and religious interests that could be useful, providing a means to drive an economic and political agenda while cloaking it with an air of respectability and sanctity.

Now imagine that Dr Stealth and his co-conspirators proceed to make contact with a small, similar group of political economists at the newish national university in Canberra and a visit is arranged. And, as a result of their meeting, Stealth decides to stay for a year and to develop a blueprint for a reducing the role and responsibility of government for schooling through progressive changes to schools funding arrangements. His brief is, over time, to dismantle, but without causing public uproar, the country's dominant form of schooling: the publicly funded, secular and free public schools through a process of progressive de-mutualisation and privatisation.

The first step he advises would be to exploit the weaknesses already becoming apparent in Australia's federal system. The idea is to cause confusion in the relationship between the states and the Commonwealth that would obscure the real policy goals and directions; and to exploit the emerging problem of the imbalance between the two layers of government in relation to revenue raising powers on the one hand and responsibilities for service delivery on the other (vertical fiscal imbalance!). Daringly and ingeniously flouting the constitutional realities in Australia, where the states

retain the legal obligation for the regulation and provision of schooling, Stealth's plan was to have the Commonwealth, the key revenue-raiser, bankroll the expansion of private schooling.

Splitting the responsibilities for schools funding in this way was seen, rightly, as having the added advantage of making it difficult to hold either level of government responsible for any of the trends or outcomes that might generate public disquiet.

In this fictional plan, Stealth includes an early move towards open-ended per capita funding for both systemic and non-systemic school in the private sector to fuel enrolment growth. He would have recognised that, at a time of overall enrolment growth, it would prove easy to disguise any link between public funding and a change in the balance of enrolments away from public and towards private schools.

Setting a resource standard based on average per student expenditure on government schools is also recommended in Dr Stealth's blueprint. This provided an equity rationale for funding the many non-government schools below that standard – while the maintenance of public subsidies to those operating well above the average standard of government schools would avoid fracturing the important alliance around private schooling.

This resource standard, however, would also assist in providing the basis for indexation, a financial device normally used to preserve the real value of grants. By using movements in average government school costs, it would be possible to provide windfall gains to all non-government schools, particularly as unavoidable diseconomies in the public sector and its rising share of the students with intensive support needs would start to drive up this per student cost. Parts of the long-term blueprint included re-couping the costs to the Commonwealth budget of this growth in places in the private school sector by cutting funds to universities - reducing the indexation of their public grants to the latter to a level below salary increases; and by imposing a kind of tax on the States for cost-shifting (through the transfer of students from the public sector where their costs were mainly met by the States to the private sector where the Commonwealth had to foot the larger share of the bill!).

In order to distract attention from this shift of funding designed to attract more students into the private sector, Professor Stealth envisaged the

creation of a brace of financially modest but high profile equity and other targeted programs which could capture headlines and divert public attention from the allocation of the bulk of public funding.

Of course, it didn't happen this way – via one grand conspiracy. But this does not deny the reality of the outcomes that have threatened the health of the public school system and public confidence in it.

What happened was that, in due course, real events began to take over from where I now leave this imaginary scenario for the moment. The policy of using public funding to effect a shift of students from public to private schools was first made quite explicit by Minister Kemp in the Howard Government, when in 1996 he introduced the device – the tax on states – known by the almost Orwellian title of the 'Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment'.

By then, real policy rhetoric had turned from discussion of public funding to meet the educational needs of children and young people to public funding to provide for parental choice in a market-driven competition.

Soon fiction was replacing fact, and we were being told by Commonwealth political leaders that the asymmetrical split in funding responsibilities for both school sectors between the Commonwealth and States had a constitutional basis. This split has no constitutional basis, in fact, and is simply an artefact of cumulative political decisions. Next, we heard Commonwealth political leaders mounting claims that there is no real difference between public and other schools and that to suggest otherwise is to identify oneself as being a relic of the past. We are invited to indulge in the fiction – the legal fiction – that there is no difference between placing a public investment in schools that are freely open to all comers and in schools that are not.

It is foolish and irresponsible to indulge in political conspiracy theories. But it is just as foolish and irresponsible to imagine that just because things have turned out as they have it must somehow be all right, must somehow be 'meant'. There is no doubt about the fact that we have taken directions in schools funding that have placed the future of our public school system at serious risk in ways that would not be countenanced in many of the countries to which we might compare ourselves. If we believe that these directions

pose a threat to our democracy, or even that they represent the seeds of such a threat, we should speak now, because serious threats start somewhere.

When the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission produced its seminal report, its members – drawn from across the public and non-government school sectors and led by Peter Karmel and Jean Blackburn – specifically warned that there was ‘a point beyond which is not possible to consider policies relating to the private sector without taking into account their possible effects on the public sector whose strength and representativeness should not be diluted’. (*Schools in Australia*. Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, May 1973, p.12.)

Well, its strength and representativeness have already been diluted and a direct (but not the only) cause of that dilution is the unique - the educationally and politically radical – scheme for the public funding of schools that has evolved over the past almost four decades.

I am not one for crystal ball gazing – the future will be something like the present, but we just don’t know quite which bits will be different. Beyond Gonski – there will be public schools and they will be publicly funded. But what kind of public schools? And who will they be serving?

Without suggesting there was ever a Golden Age, I do believe that we have lost some of the safeguards – the checks and balances that we once had – such as the Schools Commission – that provided space for proper, civil and open debate.

And this brings me to a Mr. Tudge.

On the 14th September – quite recently – a Mr. Tudge, the member for the Federal seat of Aston, rose in the House of Representatives to express his concern about what he perceived to be – he must know something we don’t – the likely directions that both the Gonski Review and then the government were likely to follow - and he expressed his concern for non-government schools.

Of the 45 schools in his electorate, 32 of them public schools, only one school merited his attention – an independent, non-government school, with, according to him, average annual per student expenditure of some \$17,000. He expressed concerns that its funds might be cut (despite ongoing political

assurances that no schools will lose funds!); and defended the current form of indexation that, unlike more conventional forms of indexation to protect against inflation, has been a device for generating real increases to such schools.

But then he said something truly shocking.

He expressed the view that non-government schools might be compelled, after Gonski, to take ‘certain cohorts’ of students or to lose their funding.

Certain cohorts? To whom does he refer? We can only presume that ‘certain cohorts’ is code for those children and young people, children with names and faces and with citizenship and educational rights just like his own children, children that this particular school is now not ‘forced’ to take.

Who are the children referred to in this euphemistic abstraction? Perhaps they are children whose parents do not have the thousands required in after-tax income to meet the school’s fees? But who contribute through their taxes to the amount the school receives from the public purse, an amount of about \$3,500 per student (again according to Mr. Tudge). Or perhaps they are children whose colour-coding corresponds with the colour-coded rankings on the ACARA MySchool database – are they children who might not be sufficiently ‘green’ for the school – are they children colour-coded ‘red’ for danger – who might put the school’s NAPLAN score at risk?

And yet, in another speech in 2010, the same Mr Tudge expressed the desire for every child to have as good a schooling as he did himself, he having had the experience, if one website is to be believed, of attending a high fee school sponsored by one religious denomination, and later, Harvard. To be fair to Mr Tudge, it is not clear where the ‘certain cohorts’ fit in his overall, confused philosophy.

Shocked by hearing other people’s children referred to as ‘certain cohorts’, I was reminded of the ending of the remarkable biography of a middle-class generation in Melbourne, Janet McCalman’s *Journeyings*⁵, in which she tracks the generations that took their tram journeys in the middle-class heartlands to establishment schools between 1920 and 1990.

⁵ Calman, J. 1993.

It ends with an ominous note about the sense of personal righteousness that such journeyings can bring. As she says, our country has always been a more class-divided one than we have ever been willing to admit. She writes that “children who are told endlessly by their parents and teachers that they are fortunate, privileged, special inheritors and examples of excellence, will find it difficult to be good democrats” (p.301).

I sincerely hope that time will prove me wrong to fear that our current schools funding arrangements may well have a significance that goes beyond schooling; and that they may be a harbinger, or even a symptom, of a declining commitment to genuine democracy and to an open and egalitarian society. Or both. But what if public schooling, and what is happening to it - significantly as a result of hostile funding arrangements – what if it is the canary down the mine?

I have raised these questions here today because I believe it is vital that ACSSO take a strong stand. The going may well get tough. The newspapers already show that those with more than their share of power and influence will launch pre-emptive strikes to defend their interests in schooling.

Public schools are in a dangerous and vulnerable situation. When it comes to advocacy for schools funding, the two sectors are quite differently placed. In the non-government sector, school authorities can campaign alongside parent and teacher groups to lobby governments for funding guarantees and increases. This is because the authority itself is largely free from any direct financial responsibility.

But no such relationship exists for government schools. This is because government school authorities, the States, are the major funders of their schools. They are thus likely to be positioned - by the fact that they will be footing all or part of the bill - to resist demands for funding increases from government school parents and teacher unions.

The effort of ensuring that government schools receive a fair share of public funding for the workload they carry and the unique legal responsibilities they bear cannot be left to teacher unions. Demonising teacher unions has proven all too easy a sport for politicians on both major teams to play.

Partly as a direct result of schools funding policies, we have been encouraging an increasing proportion of families into private schools, even

though they cannot afford to pay the cost of their children's tuition (even in a situation where these cater for a disproportionately low share of the students with high cost, intensive learning support needs). That salary bill is now being covered from the public purse.

My great fear is the lack of public understanding that what we are doing is placing an ever-increasing proportion of Australia's publicly-funded teachers behind the gates of non-government schools. But the decisions about which young people get through those gates to gain access to those teachers are almost all made privately, by private authorities. It is they who set the price and the conditions for access to that public asset – those teachers – through fees and other school entry criteria. Is that a healthy situation from the point of view of democracy?

But what is almost as worrying is that many or most of those parents (like the general public) have no idea that their children's teachers are all paid for from the public purse. It is this veil of ignorance that is, in itself, highly disturbing. It has something in common with the sub-prime mortgage market that contributed to the global financial crash. For we also need to remember that, in our hybrid system of public and non-government schools, the public school system is, biologically speaking, the host – the basic provider in a system of compulsory schooling. Its existence is essential to the existence of non-government schools as they currently operate in this country

In this very real sense, the health and strength of the public school system is critical to the health of the school system overall. We do not want to run the risk of developing a sub-prime school system.

We are entitled to expect the report of the Gonski Review to identify the need for a more effective, clear and rational relationship between the investment of public funds and the achievement of educational standards. And we are entitled to hope that its recommendations will address the need to ensure an adequate supply of high quality teachers for all schools, and to guarantee that all students in all schools have access to those quality teachers they will need to achieve nationally-agreed curriculum outcomes.

How will the Review ensure that in deciding on the mechanisms for apportioning public funding among schools, proper account is taken of the need to ensure a balance between the total resources available to schools and

the education workload they carry, so that public schools are not left to do the 'heavy lifting' without the share of resources they require?

In relation to standards, how will the Funding Review ensure that all schools in receipt of public funding operate within comparable and equitable resource standards in relation to their students' needs; that the public schools that all students can attend provide the benchmark for these standards; and that any disparities in the resources available to students among different schools and sectors can be justified by governments in educational terms?

How will the Review contribute to a rational and functional relationship between Commonwealth and State/Territory governments for the recurrent public funding of all schools, to overcome the current disconnection between their current funding responsibilities for public and non-government schools?

These are the kinds of question to which I believe ACSSO must seek answers from the Gonski panel.

Parkes conceived of public education as a gift from the nation as a whole to its children, paid for by all citizens and open to all. It was a vision of an education system as a social contract to secure decent minimum standards and to enable reciprocity – to share the advantages and privileges and the costs and burdens of universal schooling fairly among schools. Parkes understood public education as a system for providing a framework of universal opportunity for children and young people to progress towards the intellectual autonomy that would allow them to become active citizens of a true democracy.

The choice is there for ACSSO and for all of us – beyond Gonski, will we stand with the principles set down by Henry Parkes as a basis for deciding the schools funding arrangements that are now the most right and proper for our hybrid school system? Or will tomorrow belong to Mr Tudge and his ilk?