

Alberici interview with Kathryn Greiner, ABC1, 20 June 2017.

EMMA ALBERICI: Now Kathryn Greiner, as I mentioned, was a panel member of the 2011 Gonski Review into Education Funding commissioned incidentally by the Gillard Labor government.

Recently, she conducted an internal review of the schools funding arrangements and governance within the New South Wales and ACT Catholic school systems.

She, and other panellists, have expressed alarm over the prospect of a failure to legislate Gonski 2.0 and she joined me a short time ago here in the studio.

Kathryn Greiner, good of you to join us.

KATHRYN GREINER, GONSKI REVIEW PANEL MEMBER: Pleasure.

EMMA ALBERICI: What is your assessment of the political debate on Gonski 2.0 so far?

KATHRYN GREINER: I am very surprised about the Labor Party. They are behaving like naughty school children at the moment. They should be sat in the corner and given lines because they are behaving like children in that if they're not going to be the ones to implement the Gonski reforms when they had their opportunity, then they seem to be spoiling it for anyone else to do that.

And at the end of the day, my attitude and I think the attitude of any of us who were involved in the Gonski reforms, this is about the children.

Stop playing the political games and just get on with it.

EMMA ALBERICI: So Labor is being disingenuous?

KATHRYN GREINER: Very disingenuous. I am very surprised about the Australian Education Union as well. I mean, in this state, our schools in New South Wales have had seen Gonski, it is happening here on their schools. They've had them on their fences for years.

Under our previous minister for education, Adrian Piccoli, we made great gains along the Gonski lines. I would have thought the unions would have been behind this whole move, which sees money going to the children who most need to have it.

EMMA ALBERICI: So you are in consultation with the Australian Education Union and the other unions in this space, what is your impression of what's driving their opposition?

KATHRYN GREINER: Well, I just have to correct you that I am not in direct consultation, but my soundings of those from the political side is that there are people who really want to see this happen.

The Greens have made a great contribution to this debate. I think it is a very constructive contribution. I am sure there's not everything about the Turnbull move that they are very happy but they are working their way through it and it just seems to me that they are spoiling, the people who are spoiling it are the Labor Party and AEU and I have to say, I am very mystified as to why that is so.

My gut feel is they just want to spoil it because they can't be the ones to bring it in to full fruition.

EMMA ALBERICI: And the Australian Education Union, what is driving them?

KATHRYN GREINER: I have no idea. I would have thought that they would have been interested in what was best for the children.

EMMA ALBERICI: Now let's talk about the Catholic sector, one that you do know a lot about. In fact, they commissioned you in New South Wales and the ACT, the Catholics bishops that is, to undertake a review of their funding arrangement for schools.

KATHRYN GREINER: Well, it was a review of the governance and the funding arrangement, yes.

EMMA ALBERICI: And so, did they get a sweetheart deal under Labor's Gonski reforms?

KATHRYN GREINER: Well, you have to remember that in the Rudd, Gillard, Rudd years, as that era was dying out, there were something like 27 different funding programs that were all agreed to, state-by-state, sector by sector, which is what the Minister Birmingham is now trying to undo and create what the Gonski Report originally set out to do, which was to have transparent, accountable, understandable funding ...

EMMA ALBERICI: And consistent?

KATHRYN GREINER: ... and consistent for all the children.

EMMA ALBERICI: So is your answer, sorry, on the Catholics that they did get a special deal?

KATHRYN GREINER: Oh yes, because there are always special deals. From 2012, and that was the problem, they were just one of many, from 2012, because they had a unique problem in New South Wales. In New South Wales we have 11 dioceses. Most other states only have two, three at the most, four but New South Wales, for historical purposes, has 11 dioceses.

So that's 11 sets of Catholic education offices, 11 sets of policies, 11 back of house arrangements, 11 sets of anything.

Now that money, to pay for that system has to come from somewhere and it's obviously coming from the money that's actually meant to be for the education of the children.

EMMA ALBERICI: So the money that is allocated for the Gonski education system is actually not necessarily in the Catholic scenario, being spent on the children?

KATHRYN GREINER: Well, it is being spent as best it can, given it has got very high overheads that a lot of the other states don't have.

EMMA ALBERICI: You pointed out in your review, as a matter of fact, that some of the money, taxpayer money for Catholic schools was being directed away from poorer dioceses into ones that were far more wealthy.

KATHRYN GREINER: There is a series of historical issues attached to the funding of Catholic schools in New South Wales. One of them was that when Cardinal Pell was in charge he actually decided that no school would have an increase in their fees at all. Not even CPI, not even 1 per cent or 2 per cent a year.

EMMA ALBERICI: And not even those in very rich suburbs?

KATHRYN GREINER: Across-the-board. One of their problems is that because they have this view that everybody should be low fee-paying, and I don't discount their capacity to do that, but logic tells you that those suburbs and those families that can afford to pay should be making a greater contribution towards their child's education.

That then frees up the money for those children where the parents can't afford to make a contribution, but still want to have a Catholic education.

EMMA ALBERICI: So did you find in your review then that there were some very disadvantaged Catholic schools particularly in those rural and regional areas that were missing out?

KATHRYN GREINER: Indeed. I found that the children that were out in the Wilcannia/Forbes diocese which is a diocese bigger than the country of France, that they weren't necessarily getting the direct funding that they were entitled to.

EMMA ALBERICI: Sorry to interrupt you but I think it is important to note for our viewers, who might find this quite surprising, that the Catholics are unique in so far as they get a pool of money they can distribute as they see fit, rather than on the specific formula devised by your Gonski panel.

KATHRYN GREINER: That's right. The Gonski panel's view and its formula was that the money would go to the child, and to the school, to the child via the school.

In system funding, the money comes en bloc and the system then determines ...

EMMA ALBERICI: This is the Catholic system?

KATHRYN GREINER: The Catholic system and there are very few other similar systems. The Lutherans have a system but they are not funded in quite the same way but the Catholic system is a unique system.

So they received money en bloc and then they decide how they're going to spend it.

Now for the last five years they have been on notice that that is an area that they need to actually come to grips with, that they are to actually identify the funding that goes to the child at the school and then the special needs subsidies that go on top of that, a child who might have disabilities or a child who is Indigenous, English as a second language, all of these subsidies are paid to the child at the school.

Now what seemed to be happening in the Catholic systemic process in New South Wales is that those subsidies were washed across the more populous dioceses which would be ones like Sydney, Parramatta, Broken Bay. They certainly have the more populous, they are the more populous diocese and that's how they tried to keep their fees low.

Now, I just think they need to take a good hard, they've been told, they need to address this and address this very quickly and it would appear to me that they have not been doing that.

EMMA ALBERICI: Do they deserve the extra money Labor says they should be getting?

KATHRYN GREINER: Look, I think the Labor Party, when it's in government, can put in as much money as they would like but there's no point in sitting back saying 'oh, we'll put more

money into it" if you don't actually have the system in place.

At what my understanding of what Senator Birmingham is trying to do is actually just put the Gonski funding in place so that you have a transparent and an accountable funding program where the children who need the money, get the money and those parents who send their children to a non-government school understand that they make a contribution towards that child's education and it is based on a funding formula that everybody understands.

EMMA ALBERICI: I know that you've been talking to David Gonski in the past couple of days, what do you both think is the result if this doesn't go through the Parliament?

KATHRYN GREINER: Well, I have to say, I wouldn't verbal David at all and I think David and his colleagues and my former colleague, Ken Boston, are looking forward to implementing Gonski Mark II which is the actual analysis of what do you need to do to provide quality teacher, teaching and learning in this country.

Now that's a whole separate conversation in itself but we're mystified at the behaviour of the unions, mystified at the Labor Party whose original idea, I think Julia Gillard must be tearing her hair out because this was the original program that they wanted and they worked so hard for and in the dying days of that Rudd, Gillard, Rudd reign that we had in Australia, it all got so messy and just to stitch up the deals to get it over the line meant that we had a very messy system.

Let's clean up the mess and get the proper system in place so that everybody knows how much money is coming their way and they can devise the programs that the children need.

EMMA ALBERICI: How significant is it if it doesn't get through?

KATHRYN GREINER: I think it is very significant. I mean, this country is falling apart.

We know that if you take the PISA results, if you take our standing within the OECD countries, that we are failing.

We are failing not only those who are the brightest of our children, but we are failing, sadly, the children who need our help most of all.

So I think we have to recognise that this is a critical time for education right across the country and it's about time that we had a proper funding formula to make sure that those children got the programs that they needed.

EMMA ALBERICI: Kathryn Greiner, thank you very much.

KATHRYN GREINER: Pleasure Emma.