

TRANSCRIPT OF FEDERATION UPDATE PODCAST 001 – GONSKI, COUNSELLORS,
GAOLS, WEAR IT PURPLE – AUG 2016

Italics denote audio clip of a different speakers.

[OPENING THEME]

The federal election is now two months behind us, with the coalition government having suffered a significant swing against them, losing seats in both the House of Representatives and the senate. For the 12 months before the election, Federation and the AEU campaigned in 8 targeted marginal seats on the issue of Gonski needs based schools funding. A ninth seat, the electorate of New England was added to the mix once independent candidate Tony Windsor, a vocal supporter of Gonski, entered the race and presented a genuine challenge to incumbent nationals member and deputy prime minister, Barnaby Joyce.

Polling conducted in those seats throughout the campaign showed that awareness of Gonski among voters more than doubled from 40% earlier in the year, to over 80% just a couple of weeks out from the election. Exit polls on July 2nd also showed that education was the second most important issue influencing votes, just behind Medicare. And in the final result, 4 of those targeted seats fell from the Coalition, and all but one experienced significant swings against the Liberal party candidates, leaving once marginal seats now balancing on a razors edge.

Such a result is heartening, showing genuine community support for the issues of education funding, however simple figures can easily over look the efforts of hundreds of campaigners over thousands of hours that went into talking to the public, attending rallies, making phone calls and carrying out campaign activities on the ground in the weeks and months before the polls.

“I want to just now, which I haven’t had the opportunity to do is also pass on my thanks to you people and your activists back in school. You’ve just been brilliant in the way that you have embraced this campaign and the work you have done in your schools. As a Senior Officer you become so proud when you just see the sheer enthusiasm and energy of you and our members back in our schools and it’s very encouraging and heartening to see it. I want to thank you personally for the work you have done over the years. To sustain this campaign, the longest sustained Union campaign on a single issue that has ever been fought in this country.”

That was Federation President Maurie Mulheron speaking at annual conference, which was held at Sydney town hall in the days immediately following the federal election.

Despite the election result, and the coalition now holding a majority of only one seat in the lower house, the government's position on school funding remains unchanged. Since the election, Education Minister Simon Birmingham has restated the government's intent to cut funding before it reaches the minimum resource standard defined in the Gonski model. In the face of such strong public sentiment in favour of needs based funding, and an election result leaving the government with only the weakest grip on power, such a position seems undeservingly confident. The real challenge facing the government now is that with the Gonski model having been legislated by the Gillard Labor government, Turnbull and Birmingham have to now figure out whether they are able to do away with the minimum resource standard and needs based funding through policy and regulation, or whether they must actually seek to pass a change in legislation through the parliament, a task which would be incredibly difficult to do with the make up of the new senate.

On the issue of School Counsellors, Federation's dispute with the department continues in the Industrial Relations Commission, with closing statements to be presented in the commission on September 1st. This is the 6th day of hearings on this matter, with witnesses for the Federation previously presenting evidence and having been subject to cross examination. The department's argument is that it is no longer necessary to employ school counsellors who hold teaching qualifications and have classroom experience as well as having the academic qualifications required of professional counsellors, and that instead these highly qualified individuals can be replaced with school psychologists who hold only a psychology degree and may have just graduated from University.

Here's Senior Vice President Joan Lemaire, speaking on the matter back May council:

“So we're left in the position in the commission where there is clearly a legal right for the Department to employ school psychologists. We say then, that we need to protect the positions of School Counsellors because of the work they do. The work they do, as defined in the award, is they bring their skills and knowledge and experience as a teacher along with their skills and knowledge and qualifications in psychology together to work to support teachers, to support students.”

School Counsellors are not the only area of education where qualifications are under threat. On the 12th of May the government announced their plans to get rid of 138 of the 158 teachers currently working in NSW gaols. It has been proposed that many of these positions are to be replaced by clerks who are employed by third party contractors and may not be required to hold any formal educational qualifications.

Federation has been campaigning against this move, with protests outside of many NSW gaols, a petition to state parliament, and a day of solidarity on August 11th that invited members to show their support with photos and posts on social media bearing the hashtag 'education beats crime'.

This matter has received a wide attention and support from different elements of the community – not only those concerned with the rights of prisoners, but those concerned for the impact in employment in small towns near large prisons, but also those who recognise the vital role education plays in reducing recidivism among criminal populations, and those who see this as yet another step in the government's relentless march towards the privatisation of public services.

On August 23, the community justice coalition and the International Commission of Jurists held a prisoner education forum in NSW Parliament House to discuss the matter.

“Teaching in a classroom is completely different to teaching in a facility that has to contain a criminal. Whilst the same teaching strategies may apply, there is a difference to teaching someone who is incarcerated, who then, the person in front of them, the teacher, has to then employ different strategies in order to get that person to sit down and to either start reading or writing. Now that takes a lot of skill. Now you imagine having an adult under your care who basically cannot read or write and is just at that point where they themselves have said to you, and you will be able to tell me these stories and nod your head, that they are not worth anything because when they were growing up all they were told was that they were not worth it and that they are dumb. You know more than anybody that is not the case. It's just that the educational journey of that individual has been completely side tracked compared to those who have had the opportunity to complete primary school, to complete high school, the school certificate as we knew it and ultimately the HSC.”

That was NSW Labor MP Guy Zangari, speaking about the plight of prisoners and the bleak future that awaits those without access to quality education.

Also speaking at the event was NSW Greens MLC David Shoebridge. Who, among other things, spoke against the privatisations agenda...

“And I think we shouldn’t miss understand the threat this particular proposal places to the profession of teaching. They are currently coming after the teachers in our gaols and they want to say you don’t need a teacher to teach. You can get someone who has got a drivers licence and you give them an online training package, you source them from a private provider and they can do every bit as good a job, in fact the government seems to think they can do a better job than professional teachers. That is a very dangerous precedent and if the government gets away with it in our prisons, replacing professional teachers with low skill, low qualification trainers, I think we should be very clear about what this is. This is a trajectory that will see them applying the same approach to teachers at TAFE, and we know what savaging there has been at TAFE and after that it will be the teachers in our Public Schools. We cannot allow the concept that you don’t need a professional teacher to teach to get a foot hold anywhere in our public service or our teaching facilities anywhere in this state. It’s starting with gaols and we need to end it here.”

This campaign continues, and all members are asked to access the campaign resources on Federations website at NSWTF.org.au/CS, that's CS for corrective services. In particular the petition to be printed and circulated in every workplace is crucial to getting the matter debated in parliament.

Finally, August 26 was Wear It Purple Day, a day devoted to promoting inclusiveness of LGBTIQ youth in schools. The day is symbolised by wearing purple, with many schools holding mufti-days, and using the day as a prompt to discuss the importance of inclusiveness within school and the broader community.

Here's federation research and industrial officer, Jen Dive...

“It’s important to ensure that everybody’s aware of some of the struggles that our young people face on a day to day basis and to be able to celebrate together the diversity that exists in our communities and to ensure that everybody in our work places also feels included. Also things like the wrist bands for wear it purple, if people can wear them throughout the day and show people in the broader community that they are supporting young people. Understand that it’s not just raising awareness to celebrate diversity but it’s certainly supporting the young people’s mental health and also the inclusivity in the community.”

Federations next state council is coming up on September 10th, with updates expected on all these issues, as well as Federations pursuit of entering into early negotiations for the new award for school based teachers, with the current award due to expire at the end of 2016.

[CLOSING THEME}

Federation update is produced by the NSW Teachers Federation. Spoken by Cameron Malcher, edited by Jason Nicholas.