



**LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION
THE HON. TONY ABBOTT MHR
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR WARRINGAH**

7 March 2012

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE HON. TONY ABBOTT MHR
JOINT DOORSTOP INTERVIEW WITH THE HON. CHRISTOPHER PYNE MHR,
SHADOW MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, APPRENTICESHIPS AND TRAINING,
ADELAIDE**

Subjects: Julia Gillard's carbon tax; independent schools; Gonski review; paid parental leave; border protection.

EO&E.....

TONY ABBOTT:

I want to make some remarks about the comments that Senator Brown made last night on 7.30 – a very, very significant admission from Senator Brown, who is not only the Leader of the Greens but effectively, he is the associate Prime Minister of this country because we only have this government because of the deal between Julia Gillard and Bob Brown. This is a Gillard-Green Government because of the deal that the Prime Minister made. Now, Bob Brown said on 7.30 last night that if these new mines in Queensland open, it will “completely cancel out the effect of the carbon package.” In other words, what Bob Brown is saying is that the carbon tax package which the Parliament has just passed will not make any environmental difference whatsoever. The author of the carbon tax package is saying that it will not make any environmental difference. So, what is the point, Prime Minister, Senator Brown, of hurting families’ cost of living and threatening workers’ jobs if this carbon tax package, on your own admission, will not make any environmental difference? I think this is a very, very significant admission from Senator Brown on behalf of the Government and I think that it completely explodes the rationale for the carbon tax.

Now, just to get on to education, I’d like to thank James Meiksans, the Principal of St Pius X School and the school community for making me and Christopher Pyne, the Shadow Minister for Education, so welcome. This is a great school. This is part of the great independent schools systems and Catholic school systems right around Australia and as far as the Coalition is concerned, we want to protect them. We want to see the independent schools of Australia continue to flourish. We want to see parents continue to have choice. We want to see parents continue to have access to the widest possible range of schools and what you will never see from the Coalition are any changes in which individual schools are the losers. There will be no funding changes that cause schools to lose and my worry with this government is that schools are the next chapter in this government’s attack on middle Australia. We’ve seen it with the carbon tax, we’ve seen it with the private health insurance rebate means test and I fear that the next chapter of their attack on middle Australia will be an assault on independent schools.

We’ve welcomed the Gonski report because it is a good body of work but there are some recommendations in the Gonski report that pose a real threat to independent schools if implemented. There’s the threat to indexation, there’s the threat to low fee schools and there is the threat of an effective means test on parents.

All of that is there in the Gonski review recommendations and I call on the Government to immediately rule out any changes along the lines of those recommendations and if the Government isn't prepared to rule them out now, I think we can safely assume that there is a new hit list coming; that Julia Gillard, in the coming election – just as she did in 2004 when she was part of Mark Latham's opposition – will have a new hit list for independent schools.

Christopher?

CHRISTOPHER PYNE:

Thank you very much Tony and it's great of you to be here in my electorate of Sturt, supporting me obviously and coming to a great school, St Pius X, here in Windsor Gardens. Tony's absolutely right about the effect of the Gonski review on the potential uncertainty in the independent schools sector. The Gonski review itself is not the problem but the Labor Party is the problem and what they cherry pick from the report is the danger that independent schools need to be very concerned about. One thing that principals and systems can't abide in education is uncertainty and there's been real uncertainty created by the Government's response to the Gonski review. If the Gonski review was to be cherry picked by the Government, and if the Government was to introduce means testing of the capacity to pay of non-government school parents, that could only lead to one thing: less funding and higher school fees. If indexation doesn't continue at six per cent as it is now, it can only mean one thing: less money for non-government schools and higher school fees and if the Government goes ahead and requires a 10 per cent minimum school fee in non-government schools, there are literally hundreds of schools around Australia, low fee schools, Catholic, Protestant schools, independent schools, that have less than 10 per cent parent contribution. That can only mean one thing: higher school fees.

So, those people who've welcomed the Gonski review need to know that it can only work if state and federal governments stump up \$113 billion more of new spending between now and 2025 so that there are no losers and quite frankly, planning the future of schooling around a fantastic intervention of \$113 billion is like a family planning their family budget around winning Powerball on Thursday. It's utterly unrealistic. So, the Coalition will be making sure that there is no backsliding by this government in support for non-government schools. There are 1.2 million children in non-government schools. They deserve the support that the Coalition is certain to give them and that the Labor Party has kept open-ended.

TONY ABBOTT:

Are there any questions?

QUESTION:

David Gonski has said he cannot understand how the Coalition has come to this position; there's no threat to the funding for independent schools and that is a view shared by the independent representatives. Why are you continuing to peddle this line?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I don't think David Gonski is a threat to independent schools but I think Julia Gillard is, because what we've seen from this government are a series of attacks on middle Australia. Whether it's the carbon tax, whether it's the private health insurance rebate means test, whether it's all the other means tests which this government has announced and, you know, the Treasurer is laying down a smokescreen with his recent attacks on so-called billionaires. The fact is, put aside his phony class war attacks on billionaires, look at the real attack on middle Australia that this government is already responsible for and let's just wait for the next chapter.

QUESTION:

So, can you explain given the Gonski review is predicated on the fact that no school will lose any funding, how will that result in higher school fees for independent schools?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, the only way the Gonski review can result in no school losing money is if there is \$113 billion worth of additional funding over the next 12 years. Now, does anyone think that \$113 billion of additional funding is forthcoming from state and federal governments in the current climate? Of course that money just isn't there. So, if these recommendations are going to be implemented, some schools inevitably are going to lose and we know who those schools will be. It will be the independent schools that this government just doesn't like. In the marrow of the Labor Party bones is a dislike for independent schools. It is in their DNA. As sure as night follows day, if this government is re-elected, there will be an independent school hit list.

QUESTION:

You keep talking about a means test but the sector has already said the SES is a style of means testing anyway. What would be the danger of, you know, developing a more discreet tool?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I'll ask Christopher to add to this but the fact is what the recommendation includes is a look at the specific capacity of the individual parents at particular schools. It's not a general community test, it is an individual family test that the review is recommending. Now, that is a means test – simple as that. Once you get away from looking at the broader community to individual families, you have a means test and that is a dramatic threat to the future of the independent school system in Australia.

CHRISTOPHER PYNE:

Tony's absolutely right. On page 81 of the Gonski review, it talks about the capacity to pay of parents in non-government schools. Now, capacity to pay is a euphemism for a means test. If you ask for the real capacity to pay of parents in non-government schools, you are essentially adopting a means test which, as Labor has done for the private health insurance rebate, is exactly the direction that Labor would like to head in. The current SES funding model is an objective model based on the census data, the qualifications, the occupations of parents in non-government schools. The Coalition will never support a means test on the parents of children in non-government schools. Labor's already introduced one for the private health insurance rebate and it would like to introduce one for private school fees. The Coalition will never support it and as Tony has said, anyone who seriously believes there is a \$113 billion pot of money about to rained down on schools around Australia, 70 per cent from the states, many of whom are basically broke and the Commonwealth which is massively in debt and deficit, is prepared to believe in anything. It's like, as I said, the family planning their budget around winning Powerball on Thursday.

QUESTION:

Another issue that you talked about is the minimum 10 per cent. So, how many schools would really be affected by that, if we were looking at, say, in the Gonski report, there's 10,500 was basically the 2009 figure per student. Well, if you were looking at 10 per cent how many school fees would really be lower than \$1,050 anyway? For private schools that would be, you know, pretty much non-existent, I would have thought?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, there are certainly some schools which do have fees lower than that, but it is the principle of the thing when it comes down to it. We think that independent schools ought to be free to run themselves, provided

they can meet the curriculum requirements, the educational standards requirements, the normal requirements for health and safety. Provided those requirements are met, independent schools should be able to run themselves. I mean, what business is it of the government to tell schools that they must increase their fees? I mean, how dare the government say to schools which exist to help people from particular communities, how dare the government say to them, "Your fees are too low." Yet that's implicit in this particular recommendation.

CHRISTOPHER PYNE:

Can I just answer that question, because actually it's very important because it goes to the perception of independent schooling in Australia? In fact, I can tell you exactly a figure of the number of schools in Queensland alone. There are 292 Catholic schools in Queensland, 77 – so, about a quarter – have school fees below 10 per cent. So, in fact, there is a specific example – a quarter of the Catholic schools in Queensland alone, because the perception of independent schooling doesn't bear out the reality. Sure, there are a few very expensive independent schools, but the vast majority of schools in the independent sector are small Christian or non-faith based schools in local communities with very low school fees serving parents who want to choose that option.

QUESTION:

Mr Abbott, just on your paid parental leave scheme, business groups today have been highly critical of the cost burden to business. Are you at risk of repeating perhaps the lack of consultation that you have been so critical of with the Labor government's mining tax?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, let me make this fundamental point first. There will be a modest cut to company tax under the next Coalition government and there will be a modest levy on the taxable incomes over \$5 million a year for the 3,000 largest companies in Australia. So, there will be no net increase in tax on large companies and there will be a reduction in tax for small business. That is our position.

The next point I make is that it is essential, if there is to be true justice and equality in this country, that women get a fair dinkum paid parental leave scheme and a fair dinkum paid parental leave scheme involves six months off at a woman's full pay. At the moment, what we have got is a welfare entitlement. Paid parental leave should not be a welfare entitlement, it should be a workplace entitlement and that means it has to be paid at a woman's full pay. That is the Coalition's commitment. We get it in respect of modern Australia, we get it in respect of modern women in a way that the Labor Party doesn't and I am amazed, frankly, that people like Sharan Burrow, the former President of the ACTU, who claim to be in favour of a fair deal for women in the workforce, aren't coming out and praising to the skies the Coalition's policy. I mean, ask Ged Kearney who she thinks has the better policy and if she's fair dinkum she would have to say that the Coalition has a better policy on paid parental leave than the Government.

QUESTION:

Is a tax cut going to be enough to appease business communities?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I'm not going to apologise to the big businesses of our country for asking them to pay this modest levy given that they will receive a modest compensating tax cut. It's a perfectly reasonable way to bring about a vital social advance. If we want real justice for women, if we want to increase female participation, if we want to boost the productivity of our economy, this is a vital reform. It is an overdue reform. Frankly, I understand why a lot of people, on both sides of politics, have their reservations about it. Ten years ago I had some reservations about it myself. But, frankly, we have got to grow, we have got to change, we have

got to move on. The Coalition has moved on and the Labor Party should stop fixating in the past on this issue.

QUESTION:

Can you guarantee, then, that you would introduce it in the first term Abbott Government?

TONY ABBOTT:

Yes, I can.

QUESTION:

Mr Abbott, recently a former Immigration Department head John Menadue dismissed as futile the Coalition's insistence on returning to Howard-era asylum seeker policies including reopening Nauru. Do you have any comment on that?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I think that Mr Menadue also admitted when he was interviewed this morning that the Howard Government's policies had worked in a way that the current government's policies have manifestly failed. I mean, there have been more than 15,000 illegal arrivals. There have been almost 300 illegal boats. You know, Julia Gillard used to be the shadow minister for immigration and occasionally she put out press releases headed up "Another boat, another policy failure". Well, I think by her standards, there were 15 policy failures in the last five years of the Howard Government. By her standards there have been 300 policy failures in the four years of the Rudd-Gillard Government. So, I know what the public know, which is that this government has no answers for border protection. The Howard Government had the answers for border protection. The Coalition has the answers on border protection and I just wish this Prime Minister wasn't so stubborn and so proud to admit that she's got it wrong, Howard had it right and to put back in place the policies that work.

Thank you.

[ends]