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Education never very high on PM's agenda

KENNETH WILTSHIRE THE AUSTRALIAN JULY 16, 2013 12:00AM

THE manner in which the new school funding reforms are being handled is a national disgrace.

In what is supposed to be a national reform to improve education outcomes we see instead piecemeal negotiations taking place, in secret, state by state, and sector by sector.

Now Tasmania has managed to have its new school funding from Canberra quarantined from the normal GST carve-up, which will discriminate against other states.

There is no place for secrecy in education policy; of all the vital sectors, such as health and housing, it is an area that demands complete openness and accountability.

The Gonski report was clear and simple; education dollars should follow the student wherever they might be enrolled and there should be weightings applied for disadvantage. But as a result of the Rudd-Gillard approach there is now no guarantee that, nationally, students in the same circumstances will be treated equally, nor any comfort that the federal government will not try to micromanage every school in the nation, despite the fact education is a state responsibility under the Constitution.

Surely we have learned from the past three years that leadership is not about doing deals; it requires adherence to a consistent set of principles and goals.

It is unfortunate that Kevin Rudd has little credibility when it comes to education. When the Goss government commissioned the review of the Queensland school curriculum and agreed to more than 95 per cent of its recommendations, Rudd took no interest in the implementation and allowed many of the initiatives to be sabotaged. Indeed his own gargantuan Office of Cabinet tried to sink many of the recommendations from the beginning, based on personal biases and ideology.

It is widely acknowledged in Queensland that Rudd was the principal cause of the Goss government's loss of office, having cut the premier off from his cabinet ministers and public opinion in general, and centralised policy determination in his own spinning machine.

Then after entering federal politics, when appointed by Kim Beazley to be Labor's representative on the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, Rudd did not attend one meeting in three years, and rarely even sent an apology.

This is despite the fact UNESCO is the world's leading body for education and benefited substantially from outstanding leadership by Gough Whitlam, Barry Jones and other Labor luminaries, who also managed to achieve greater international attention and resources for educational needs in the Pacific. But, in his stints as foreign minister and prime minister, Rudd rejected the chance to walk in to a seat on the executive board of the UN's body for education, preferring a very costly campaign for a seat on the moribund UN Security Council.

Ironically, past Coalition governments, while less enthusiastic supporters of UNESCO, gave significantly more support for its education, culture and scientific endeavours particularly under David and Rod Kemp and Chris Ellison.

Now we find that most of the education reforms Rudd initiated as prime minister have ended in a shambles. The national school curriculum is no longer national, with states opting out of many aspects; the content of the curriculum itself is poor and patchy and has been condemned by experts in just about every discipline, and there are no apparent values serving as its foundation.

The so-called Building the Education Revolution was a gigantic piece of politicking and plaquing, with some schools forced to build structures they did not want or need, and then auditors-general and a review have identified more than \$8 billion in wasted taxpayers' money through poor implementation. It is clear the Prime Minister took little interest in the implementation of this policy initiative.

One of Rudd's significant achievements, the creation of the Australian National Training Authority for vocational education and training, was dismantled by the Gillard government with not a murmur from Rudd and

not a mention of his wanting to re-establish a strong national presence in this vital field for our skills base and productivity.

And now he shows no signs of reversing Julia Gillard and Wayne Swan's slashing of more than \$2bn from universities and is even talking of placing caps on tertiary enrolments. All this from the party that gave us the grand Whitlam initiatives that allowed so many poor and underprivileged students to attend university.

The scuttlebutt among Queenslanders who have worked with Rudd is that he is incapable of changing his ways. He is extremely intelligent and frighteningly creative and innovative in his thinking but hopeless in follow through. You would want him in your team, but not as leader.

Hopefully they will be proved wrong. Hopefully, also, Tony Abbott will recognise the soundness of the Gonski blueprint but devise a better approach to funding it. On education at present we are not being offered much of a choice in vision and policy. The Coalition may be hoping that it will be a case of the devil you don't know, rather than the one you do know, but the nation's education deserves better than that.

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