

Our students  
deserve  
more than  
an empty

**SLOGAN**



**Peter Costello**



**GILLARD ISN'T  
LEARNING**

There's little point  
in "giving a  
Gonski" when this  
Government is  
doomed already

**T**HERE'S a world of difference between a policy and a slogan. A policy is something thought out and designed to be implemented. Usually it has a price and an explanation about how the money will be raised to pay for it.

A slogan is just a catchy phrase used to market a policy.

"Lucky you're with AAMI" is a jingle to market car insurance. It is not the product. It is the sales pitch.

For the past five years the Government sold its education policy under the slogan "Building the Education Revolution". Did it mean that education would be revolutionised?

Well, apparently not, because after that five-year-plan we are now told we need the biggest changes in school education in 40 years to improve the system. The Government won't say if counter-revolutionaries captured the BER or whether the policy (as distinct from the slogan) was just a dud.

It is moving to a new slogan called "I give a Gonski".

As slogans go, it is not much. It is not really apparent what a "Gonski" is and far from clear what a Gonski

education will look like as compared with the "education revolution".

Also, the word Gonski can be made to sound like other things. The shadow minister, Christopher Pyne, has taken to referring to it as a "Con-ski".

The slogan originates in a report delivered to the Government back in 2011 by a panel chaired by businessman David Gonski. The Government could have taken the report, drawn up its own policy and badged it with a slogan like "The Ladder of Opportunity" or something like "Education Gold".

The reason it has run with the Gonski moniker is, I think, because it wants people to think this is not so much a Gillard, a Garrett, or a Labor policy (those descriptions having run out of marketing appeal), but a credible policy because it was recommended by a respected businessman.

As I said earlier, there is a difference between a policy and a slogan. The policy announced on Sunday has a whole lot of extras that were not recommended by Mr Gonski — like cutting funding to higher education, which I am pretty sure he does not support.

But he should have been aware that a recommendation to spend more money will always have negative consequences when a Government is in deficit. It will mean cutting other spending (for example, on universities), increasing taxes (for example, on superannuation) or borrowing money to be paid off by future generations. In this case it has involved all three.

"Building the Education Revolution" started off as a proposal to put a computer on every school desk. When it transpired that it would cost a lot more than the Government had budgeted, BER morphed into an economic stimulus program to build a school hall in every school.

The original thinking behind the Gonski Report was to set a new formula for school funding. It developed into a plan to spend more money.

Now the Gonski proposal has morphed into a stoush between the Commonwealth and the states about who is responsible for education and who is to fund it. Ms Gillard wants the state governments to help finance her

policy. The states, who are traditionally responsible for education, think she should be funding their policies.

Ms Gillard wants her scheme to start next year and run for six years. Let's take a reality check on that. Does anyone think Ms Gillard will be in office in six years? Does anyone think she will be in office in 2014? So why would the states sign up to her proposal now? Her angle is that if they sign now they will get more money than a future Coalition will give them. But an outgoing government cannot bind an incoming one. Take it from me.

**W**HETHER the states sign or not, whether Labor is re-elected or not, education funding will be adjusted many times between now and 2019.

Back in April 2010, Kevin Rudd came up with a plan to "fix" hospitals by offering to increase Commonwealth spending if only the states would tip in 30 per cent of their GST receipts to match it. Amazingly, states like NSW and Victoria (then under state labor governments) were prepared to agree. It took the Premier of

Western Australia, Colin Barnett, to stand up and lead the resistance. When Rudd was unexpectedly struck down by his own party three months later, the plan was never talked about again.

How foolish were those governments to flirt with surrendering their financial resources to a leader whose lifespan was so limited?

The thing that worries me about this Government is that it has mismanaged just about everything it is responsible for, from border control to mining taxes. So now it offers to extend its reach into areas where it has no traditional responsibility and no direct managerial control? That is truly the triumph of hope over experience.

Somewhere along the line these education slogans have run far beyond the policy, far beyond the capacity of government to deliver and dare I say, far beyond reality.

I have a slogan the premiers could use for their response: "Whistle Dixie."

**Peter Costello is a former federal Treasurer**