



FOR MEDIA

CRAIG EMERSON

Member for Rankin

**Transcript of Interview Dr Craig Emerson
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BYNER: Many of us are familiar with family payments. These are given to people, parents who start families and one of the things that we normally do with children is send them to pre-school. My next guest is suggesting that if we err and do not do that, that there should be some way to give people the incentive to do it. So maybe what we do is we take away their family payments unless they do send them to pre-school. Is it draconian? Is it mutual obligation? Let's talk to Labor MP Dr Craig Emerson. Thanks for joining us.

EMERSON: Thanks very much.

BYNER: Tell me what your thinking is on this.

EMERSON: Let's identify the problem first. Every year, 58,000 kids miss out on a pre-school education. That puts them at a real disadvantage compared with those kids who do have a pre-school education because all the research shows that the ones who are ready to learn at formal school at day one do a lot better than the kids who are just struggling because they haven't spent a lot of time with other kids or done the basic learning skills. That then has an effect right through their lives. Many of those kids stay behind and the idea here is to encourage parents to send their kids to pre-school. The record in South Australia is very good and there's a good system of kindergartens and child parent centres and very high levels of attendance. But those 58,000 kids are spread right around Australia and they are missing out badly and I think we need to discuss some measures to ensure they do get that pre-school education.

BYNER: Why are there so many parents of so many Australian children who don't ensure that they have a pre-school education?

EMERSON: Basically they are disadvantaged kids. They might be in indigenous communities and remote communities. There's also plenty in built-up urban areas. There are problems such as arranging transport or parents being at work at that time. Maybe parents just not coping. The idea here is for the government authorities to note that the child is not going to pre-school, ring up and say 'can we help' with transport, to organise you and your kids to be able to get them off to pre-school? So it's not meant as a way of saving government money, but a way of making contact with parents and saying look, this

is what we'd like to do. In some cases they may just say 'no, rack off, don't want to talk to you, none of your business ... I'll decide whether our kids go to school or not'. In those circumstances it might be necessary for the authorities to say 'we do have the right to suspend your family payments. We would really like you to come in and have a chat about it'.

BYNER: So...you want to be able to use the suspension of family payments as a lever if necessary or as a last resort?

EMERSON: Absolutely a last resort.

BYNER: To encourage parents to pre-school their children?

EMERSON: That's right; and for the authorities to be able to work with the parents to identify any problems and resolve those problems. The objective is not to save government money. The objective is to ensure every young child has a flying start in life and the same chance in life.

BYNER: Do you think the public would support your measure?

EMERSON: Given that overwhelmingly parents do send their children to pre-school, I may actually get some support. I understand it's controversial but we do know that there are kids roaming the streets.

BYNER: Why do you think it's controversial?

EMERSON: Because some people will say 'it's nothing to do with government...whether kids go to school or pre-school'. I think it is something to do with government and I think it's all to do with children having that opportunity for a good education. Missing out on a good education does spill over to the rest of society. If we look at the prison population, there is a very high proportion who were expelled from school or didn't go to school much at all. Not only does it very tragically and sadly affect the children themselves, but the rest of the community through violence, crime, drug dependency.

BYNER: You're a Labor MP. Are you going to try and get this on the agenda as a policy?

EMERSON: The answer is 'I am' and I'd like to see it on the agenda of the Council of Australian Governments. In Australia, the Federal Government spends the least amount on pre-school education of any western developed country. I want to see the Federal Government working with the states. South Australia is a good example of having a comprehensive kindergarten system. Fortunately in South Australia, it's free of charge. In a couple of other states it's not and in order for this to work, you'd need to ensure that a pre-school education was free for those disadvantaged kids.

BYNER: The other point is, even if it is free, some people still won't send their children. So why?

EMERSON: Some people are just in a terrible situation themselves. They might be drug dependent. The victims are obviously the parents but very often the children too and then they are behind the eight ball from before their first day at school and I'd like to see all kids have the same chance in life...all kids being able to go to pre-school.

BYNER: I think you've put up a very good argument today and I wish you a Merry Christmas.

EMERSON: You too.