

## CPM Reviews

**Transcript:** Research Interview

**SENSITIVE:** Personal

### File Details

**Job Name:** AEU History Project

**Billing Ref:** PO No

File:	Mins:	File ID:	File Name:
1 of 1	39	26473	2021.05.18_10.04_01 Robin Trinca.MP3

**Total Minutes:** 39 recorded minutes

**Date of Recording:** 18 May, 2021

### Speaker Index

Identifier	Name / Position	Role
Mr Haggar:	Clive Haggar, Former Secretary AEU	Interviewer
Ms Trinca:	Ms Robin Trinca, Former Assistant Secretary and Tafe Organiser	Interviewee

### Start of Transcript

#### File 1 of 1

**Mr Haggar:** Right, I'm interviewing Robin Trinca, formerly Robin Ballantyne, who was a long-term officer of the AEU in Canberra, firstly as a TAFE organiser and then as Assistant Secretary Professional. So, Robin, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed today. As you appreciate, what we'll eventually wind up with is a transcript that will go on the website of the union for members to read, in amongst the collection of other people who've been interviewed for the history project. So if we could begin, perhaps you could outline your work history as how you became a teacher?

**Ms Trinca:** Well, I think I'm of that generation, Clive, that for young women, we thought a successful end to a school career led to teaching or nursing, basically. I don't think - you know that phrase, "you can't be what you can't see", was probably true of me, coming from a migrant background. Although I must say my father was very big in encouraging us to go on to uni, and my mother

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suggested various things like pharmacy or physiotherapy, but in the end I was a bit of a snob and they were TAFE courses at the time. So I went to the University of Western Australia and studied English literature for my sins, which I loved but which turned out to be not terribly useful.

**Mr Haggar:** **In terms of your subsequent career, yes.**

Ms Trinca: I guess I always - I guess I was good at school and I thought teaching was something that I could do. As I said, I could see it, I thought I could manage it. So I first joined the public service in Canberra, really I suppose to move - so that I could move away from family in Perth and have a change, but I always knew that at the end of that first year as a graduate clerk in the Treasury that I would go and do my teaching qualification and go teaching. I did that and I started off at Melrose High School.

**Mr Haggar:** **In terms of your actual qual, you would have done that at the Canberra College of Advanced Education, now University of Canberra?**

Ms Trinca: Yeah, that's right, the old DipEd was delivered only at CCAE. ANU didn't have education courses. So, I think that CCAE had only been going for a couple of years when I did it in 1974. It was a windswept, pretty nasty campus, to be honest.

**Mr Haggar:** **Yes, I was actually doing my Dip. Ed. there in 1974.**

Ms Trinca: Were you? Oh, were you really?

**Mr Haggar:** **Yes.**

Ms Trinca: You were doing English then.

**Mr Haggar:** **English history, yes.**

Ms Trinca: Yeah. I must say, I thought the DipEd was bloody awful, actually. We'll have to cut this out of the transcript, but I don't think I learnt very much. I did a sort of a DipEd years later, through University of Wollongong, in Teaching of English as a Second Language, which showed me how bad the first course had been.

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**Mr Haggar:** **Yes, I found myself doing double the required...**

Ms Trinca: It was so much better.

**Mr Haggar:** **...amount of practice teaching, because I was feeling very inexperienced and inept...**

[crosstalk 0:03:21]

**Mr Haggar:** **...and facing a placement at Alice Springs High School. So I did as much prac teaching as I could before I left, because I certainly felt that the course was in need of substantial reform back in 1974.**

Ms Trinca: Yes. I did prac teaching in Darwin, actually. It was a great system then, when the Commonwealth had taken over from the Territory, and so we all got a chance to go and do our prac up there.

**Mr Haggar:** **Yes, it was a great recruitment tool.**

[crosstalk 0:03:58]

**Mr Haggar:** **Because, in fact, whilst I didn't do my prac up there, I had friends that did and they came back so full of wonderful tales. So I stopped being a New South Wales scholarship holder and rejected a placement at Queanbeyan High School as a support teacher and went to Alice Springs instead.**

Ms Trinca: Ah, okay. Well, I was a Commonwealth scholarship holder in '74. Yeah, I thought I would actually go to the Territory and teach, but I had already met the man who was to become my husband. So I didn't. I took a posting in Canberra instead.

**Mr Haggar:** **So what motivated you, as a beginning teacher, to join the union?**

Ms Trinca: Well, to be honest, the day I arrived at Melrose High Allen Stevenson was the principal, as I recall, and he handed me the papers to sign on and amongst them was the paper to join the union and he said "We're all members here, so you will be too," and I did. I remember being slightly not put out, but just surprised, and I thought I'd better do what I'm told, so I

signed on. I wasn't an involved union member at all. There were a lot of strikes during those mid-'70s, and some of them I was actually technically a scab on because I didn't agree with some of them. I didn't really become involved or interested in the union until I was teaching at TAFE years later. I had spent years as a casual teacher on - you know, with very poor conditions, really, just a continuing casual. I remember I wrote to the dean of my faculty to complain about my status as an employee and she referred me to the union. I thought, okay, if you're going to pass a buck to the union, I will join the union. So I did. That's when I became involved in the sort of fight that was going on to give some kind of permanency or contract work to a whole host of casual teachers, mainly in the ESL field, who had been working for years as casuals.

**Mr Haggar:** **Almost the entire department was casualised and on hourly rates at that time.**

Ms Trinca: That's right.

**Mr Haggar:** **Yeah. So in terms of your actual activism, the motivation was your own working conditions at that time, and those of your colleagues, but what took you from that point to becoming a union official as a TAFE organiser?**

Ms Trinca: Well, I'd been fairly active, with some other people, in this push for getting our permanency, which we got at a sort of 0.4 load. I was keen to work full-time and there was no prospect of that part-time status being changed to full-time or even being increased. I remember - and the job became vacant, and the organiser who was leaving the job suggested it to me. I thought about it for about five minutes and I thought, well, here's a full-time job that I think I might enjoy. I was attracted to the idea of advocacy, to be honest. So I thought, well, this could be good and I will get a full-time job out of it. So I guess, again, it was a bit of a personal motivation. But also, you know, I'd built up a fair amount of respect for the union, and a fair amount of anger I guess around the conditions we'd had, and I thought that I was fairly - you know, that it might suit me and that I might be able to do something.

**Mr Haggar:** **So who did you succeed as TAFE organiser?**

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Ms Trinca: That was Andrew Blanckensee.

**Mr Haggar: Of course. Who was another ESL teacher at the time.**

Ms Trinca: Yes, he was.

**Mr Haggar: Yeah. So in terms of your time as a TAFE organiser, what were the major systemic issues that you faced within the Institute, as it was by then?**

Ms Trinca: Well, it was huge. You know, we're talking about I came in at the end of '98 I think it was, yes. So in the early '90s, you know, Keating had set up ANTA and brought the state TAFE systems under a sort of national framework. Which was, you know, probably a necessary and good thing, but with it came competitive tendering, you know, the privatisation of the vocational education market. Along with that came the whole business of these training packages which specified the skills within every particular trade.

**Mr Haggar: The competencies.**

Ms Trinca: That's right, and the competency-based training, which was a huge challenge for teachers. You'll remember with it, with the privatisation of the vocational education market, the setting up of those private group training authorities and then the training organisations, the deregulation of the trades, meaning that a person could no longer need a ticket for a trade unless they wanted to be a plumber or electrician. It was a bit open slather. So a lot of potential students for TAFE, apprentices no longer were obliged to go to TAFE for their theory component, it could be delivered onsite, and we lost a lot of students and a lot of redundancies followed as you recall. So it was really a time of tremendous turmoil during the '90s in the TAFE sector, and not all of it turned out well.

**Mr Haggar: One of the great ironies, of course, now is that we've had a history since that time of funding rorts, shonky organisations, hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of government funding that was lost to organisations that delivered worthless qualifications, et cetera. Now, that, of course, wasn't all of the private training market, but minimal regulation was one of the great problems. Of course, they've now had**

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**to set up national regulatory bodies to try and instil some kind of accountability and discipline in the sector, but we're still faced, in 2021, with a TAFE that is underfunded for the work it's expected to do, but our national training effort is pathetic in comparison to what it should be in terms of delivering skills.**

Ms Trinca: That's right. That's what I mean by not turning out well. I think a lot of that was foreseeable. I think we, in the union, predicted some of that.

**Mr Haggar: We did.**

Ms Trinca: We'd been talking about it for years. You know, a few years ago, once again the media suddenly discovered the story of the rorts in the private sector and people were turning to me and saying "Ooh, did you know about this, Robin?" and I said "We've been - actually, that's a 20-year-old story." You know, the whole range. I mean some of the private providers were very good, but then at the other end you had the ones who you pay your money and you get your certificate...

**Mr Haggar: That's right, yes.**

Ms Trinca: ...through the post.

**Mr Haggar: Yes. Getting a certificate in - you know, RPL being used in questionable ways to, basically, you pay a fee, you get your certificate, including, in some cases I'm familiar with, Certificate IVs.**

Ms Trinca: Yeah.

**Mr Haggar: What other issues for TAFE? I mean funding was probably the major issue during those years, and managing the contraction of what had been three independent colleges to one institute and the reduction in the workforce. But on the issue of wages for teachers during your time, I can't remember that we had specific battles over TAFE salaries we were able to piggy-back TAFE members on the backs of what school teachers were able to achieve.**

Ms Trinca: That's right. I think that the wages thing was reasonably straightforward. There were sometimes suggestions at the beginning that we would only get,

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you know, CPI or whatever, but we managed to do that fairly well and we actually managed to hold the line on the teaching load. I think the big thing for me at that time was what I think was an inspired deal, if I may say, that I think you did with Kate Carnell at the time. As a sort of return, if you like, for a wage increase for teachers, you negotiated the idea of the professional development and the need for appraisal to move up the band 1 teaching scale. I think that was a good thing. You know, it was actually win-win for us. Even though they thought they were having a win, it was a double-win for us. We got the salary and we had access - in TAFE, particularly, the teachers had direct access and control of I think around about \$400 at the time. It was a substantial amount of money that they could personally direct towards their own professional development with the agreement of their supervising teacher. But it was something that was really important to teachers. It also - the whole requirement to do professional development was something that I think was needed. In TAFE it was welcomed pretty strongly. I still remember talking to a group of painting teachers who told me that what they really needed to do was to save that money up for about two or three years and go to an international paint conference because that was the very best thing that they could ever do to learn new techniques. I thought, well, actually that would have never have occurred to me and it sounds like a rort, but I believed them, that that was, in fact, a way for them to stay abreast of the industry in their field. So they had some control.

**Mr Haggar:** I mean in terms of that issue of - I was describing it at the time as a re-professionalisation of elements of the workforce, I mean that's something that I think the focus is still there today. But certainly the deal with Kate Carnell was done largely as a result of a settlement in the schools area and we were able to translate that. I remember the director at the time, Norm Fisher, being somewhat upset that he was sidelined. He'd been told by the Chief Minister to actually do this deal, and the kinds of nasties and trade-offs that he'd hoped for were just simply set aside.

Ms Trinca: Yes.

**Mr Haggar:** So I tend to agree with you, it was a win-win for the union and the members. So that's covering off on wages and conditions. What about

**morale in the TAFE? I mean you've had effectively since Keating's - I'll put it in inverted commas - reforms, you've had 30 years of TAFE bashing, of being held accountable for the appalling state of skills development in this country at various times, particularly by conservative governments, but how did the workforce respond to those attacks?**

Ms Trinca: I think there has been a demoralisation going on in TAFE, which, from what I hear, is still kind of prevalent. To me, I don't really think that Australian politicians understand vocational education and technical skilling. If you compare us to countries in Europe where it has a much higher status choice for a young person going through high school years to go to a technical high school or to go on. Some of my Italian cousins did, to the age of - a kind of extended high school, if you like, to take them up to 19 or 20, by which stage they were skilled electricians or whatever. I don't think we have ever given it the status, and I think it still suffers from that and suffers in the public's mind too. Everybody in this country, and this is probably not unique in Australia now, but everyone wants their child to go to university. Politicians, basically, are of the class who want their children to go to university. I've never really thought that any politicians on either side really get TAFE and what it's about, and the broad range of people, including second-chance learners, that it is there to satisfy. TAFE has made - you know, over the years they've tried to reinvent themselves and the CIT has done very well in actually setting up degrees in fashion and childcare and so on. This is great, but I would argue that it has kind of taken the focus away from what you want, which is apprentices and the skilling of apprentices.

**Mr Haggar: Skill-based trades, yes.**

Ms Trinca: Yes. Skilled people who - and I don't really see the reason for it, because as we all know, if you're a good tradesman you can make money and have a decent life. So it's about the status. Someone told me the other day, a hairdresser actually, a hairdressing apprentice cutting my hair told me that it's now, she believes, a six-year apprenticeship for plumbing because they have to do so much electronics work or something like this. Now, I don't know if that's true, but I think that it kind of points to the fact that these are



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becoming increasingly complex trades and they should be honoured with the status that they deserve.

**Mr Haggart:** **Yes. As somebody who's just had a solar system installed, the guys that have done that have high-level IT skills as well as the electrical. I'm just thinking, one of - as you'd be aware, in recent history at the CIT there's been very serious allegations of workplace bullying and harassment. This has gone to the point of apart from being publicly reported in the press, there were detailed independent reports into the workplace culture that existed, highlighting I think quite a substantially alienated workforce from management and issues within the workforce itself. When you were TAFE organiser, did you ever have to deal with that sort of culture?**

**Ms Trinca:** I have to be honest with you that, both when I was teaching and when I was the organiser in TAFE, I didn't actually experience that and I was a little surprised in subsequent years to hear about it. I'm not in a position to confirm it or deny it, quite frankly. But as a union officer, my - no one in TAFE ever approached me with a complaint of being harassed or bullied. My experience of that came later in the school sector. So I don't really think I can make any comment.

**Mr Haggart:** **Okay, so you then returned to the CIT, after you finished your time as an organiser, for a period. I think you were involved in curriculum at CIT.**

**Ms Trinca:** That's right, I was. Yeah, I was involved in the curriculum, and particularly around a degree course that they were - I can't remember if it was a continuum or they were redoing a degree course. So most of it was at that higher end of TAFE that was doing associate diplomas and degrees. I sat on a board, the higher education board of the ACT. That was very interesting. Basically, a board that certified non-university groups that wished to award university-level qualifications like degrees. I also worked on a training package, so I got some sense of the - I think it was the kitchen fitting training package. Got some sense of the incredibly specificity, if that's the word, of training packages. Once you would have been a carpenter and, the master-servant relationship, the master would have taught you a broad range of

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skills, I would have thought, within carpentry. Now you were either a kitchen fitter, or you might have been a guy who put up - threw up the housing frames. But the skills were quite narrow, you know, I mean in training packages and you were being trained for this aspect of carpentry. Sometimes it might just be - you know, anyone could call themselves a carpenter, by the way, whether they'd done the training package or not. If you just put a staple gun in their hand and show them how to use it, you're a chippy sort of thing. But it was interesting to work to see the vast - the sort of schism between working on the degree courses and what was considered to be the assessment procedures and so on for that where they talked about knowledge and working on the trade course where it was all about competencies and skills and very mechanistic. No one talked about pedagogy or anything like that in the trade area, which I think is a great shame.

**Mr Haggar:** **Yes. So you then returned to employment at the union as Assistant Secretary Professional. What motivated you to come back into the fold.**

Ms Trinca: Yeah, I came back as assistant secretary and that was a wonderful job, to be honest. I very much enjoyed, because I'd started off as a high school teacher, the return to the school sector. I loved the variety and the portfolio. It was such a broad portfolio. I enjoyed the discussions that teachers would have about pedagogy, student welfare. This was all a breath of fresh air after TAFE, frankly.

**Mr Haggar:** **Of course, you were coming back into an environment where there were now quite established professional pathways, additional professional development. The focus I think had moved quite substantially, following that original agreement with the Carnell Government, into a focus very much on the professional improvement of teachers in the workplace and proper support for them.**

Ms Trinca: Yeah, it had. Of course, part of the portfolio was the whole children with disabilities in class, even though that's always been a really difficult area, both for teachers and difficult for parents too. But, yeah, there was a lot going on, there was a lot developing. The union nationally developed the Indigenous education awards, that was delightful to me. I was editor of the

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teachers' journal and set up an Indigenous news page and pedagogy pages, I enjoyed all of that. We had - what were the big things then in the teaching sector? I suppose, for me, it's overwhelmed by what happened at the very end of my time there, when we sort of lost or failed to win the case to protect the secondary teaching loads, and teachers had to work for an additional hour in the classrooms.

**Mr Haggar:** **That was the result of the arbitration to settle the 2006 dispute. The associated staff cut was just within the colleges.**

Ms Trinca: Okay. Well, yes, I mean that was I suppose bound to happen, but it did feed into my decision to retire at the end of that year. But...

[crosstalk 0:25:07]

**Mr Haggar:** **Just to put a timescale into that, it was, of course, during the introduction of Work Choices and it was the Stanhope Government that was trying to initially cut staff right across the system. They wound up getting about 25 positions out of the secondary colleges. Of course, you were present, weren't you, when we had that meeting with Jon Stanhope after the arbitration, in which he apologised for the behaviour of his government?**

Ms Trinca: Yes, I can't remember that. I mean, yeah. Anyway, whatever it was, it wasn't a huge thing I suppose. But teachers are always very angry about that kind of thing, so I suppose that reflects in the kind of calls one is taking in the union office the day after the announcement comes. But that's part of being a union officer. You know, whether it's going out to see the mechanics of just - you know, in TAFE, when I was there to say goodbye, and they shake your hand but you can see that they're not happy with you at all because they feel the union's failed to protect their jobs. But I think, as a union officer, you've just got to suck that up and show your face.

**Mr Haggar:** **The issue of - well, a part of that assistant secretary's role was that of women's officer in the union. We hadn't, in previous years, been able to have a full-time women's officer for a number of years. I think Audrey Duke was the last full-time women's officer. But the sorts of issues that women faced within the organisation in the '90s and noughties, would**

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**you like to comment in terms of some of those issues and what the union was doing to try and address them?**

Ms Trinca: Yes. I think for me, personally, I think the contribution I made to the national debate at women's meetings about that was by running the figures within our own branch. Where I discovered that women, in terms of promotion, were very well represented - were represented in proportion to the membership at the first promotional level, and even slightly better represented at the deputy principal level, but then that they were massively underrepresented at the principal level. Which was a very interesting finding, and I think some of my colleagues interstate went away and tried to do some figures themselves, because it seemed to me that there was a capacity for promotion within teaching for women, but somehow it plateaued out after the deputy principal level. Now, whether that was partly due to the other exigencies of women's lives that they didn't want to take on that, in a sense, CEO role of being principals, or whether it was that there was still remaining prejudice against the idea of a woman actually being that top dog in the school. Probably a bit of both I suspect, knowing women who were happy to be deputy principals but didn't particularly want to go any further, but also I think there were women who were putting themselves forward for those top jobs and they weren't getting them. But I don't know what to make of that, really. I think because it is a female-dominated sector that we perhaps didn't face quite the same challenges that in many other fields women have faced simply by virtue of numbers.

Mr Hagar: **It's interesting, because if you look at the figures in the early '80s, we didn't have, for example, a female secondary principal. We had only a handful of primary principals who were women. Certainly, if you look nowadays, I think the statistics, in terms of numbers of women principals, are substantially better. Of course, we've had a series of women chief executives running the system, and also female ministers, which I think has effectively destroyed the kinds of gendered notions about you needed to be a male to be an authority figure. I think that's largely disappeared now in teaching.**

Ms Trinca: Yes. I think things are changing. I remember having a discussion with my own boys when the debate came up about the lack of male teachers in

schools, in primary schools in particular. I thought they would be quite in sympathy with the notion that they had needed male role models and they laughed at me. They thought that was hilarious to think that they needed to have male teachers in order to do well at school or whatever. They thought that the gender of their teacher was totally irrelevant. So I think things are changing with the generations.

**Mr Haggar:** **Yes. I'm just thinking, too, in terms of some of the personalities that you dealt with within both the schools area and TAFE, but also, too, in the women's - sorry, in the union office itself. I mean you were stuck with me as your senior officer within the union, so we'll pass on comments about the way I did things, but I was reflecting with...**

**Ms Trinca:** I don't want to pass on that. I think you were one of the best bosses I ever had, Clive, to be honest. We had our spats at times, but I always felt that I could say my piece with you. I was always happy to leave the final decision to you because I guess that's the kind of person I am, I thought that was your job in the end. But the stuff I really found interesting in the union office I guess was this variety of the work. Because as well as all of the stuff on my own portfolio, I had to kind of make up the numbers at the EBA meetings as well, which were always great fun as you'd recall. Which were always, you know, very interesting and, in the end, the kind of sticky end of being a union official that is very important to our members. The big - there were a lot of interesting people in it, in the special education area, the school counsellors I was responsible for, the Indigenous teachers. I was able to sort of cultivate a couple of our Indigenous members to take on roles for the union.

**Mr Haggar:** **I was thinking of the sort of educational leadership roles provided by one of your predecessors, Fiona MacGregor, for example, and Rosemary Richards, Warren Lee with his work both as an organiser and secretary. Warren had a real focus on the industrial issues that ordinary working members faced. Of course, Rosemary's no longer with us, but it's been interesting to weave the threads of their contributions to the organisation. I think Peter Malone gave a substantial professionalisation, given his experience from Western Australia, to the role of industrial officer as well. Of course, given the relative difference between our membership density in schools and**

**TAFE, I really thought people like yourself, Andrew Blanckensee, and some of the other TAFE organisers that we had, really had a very hard road to hoe in terms of that environment there. It was a lot harder than what our school teachers - school organisers faced in a broader, much more dense membership environment in the schools. We were of course fortunate in having TAFE members such as Cassandra Parkinson and Kevin Peoples who went on to national leadership roles.**

Ms Trinca: So, what are you asking to me to comment on?

**Mr Haggar: Well, just see if you just had some fond memories of working with those people that I've just mentioned.**

Ms Trinca: Well, I can tell you, yeah, there was some big shoes to follow there. I remember Warren, on about day two in the union office, he gave me the invaluable advice of saying "Remember, always ask the member what they want you to do, because very often they don't want you to do anything, they just want you to listen to them."

**Mr Haggar: That's right.**

Ms Trinca: "Don't assume that and go off and start advocating on their behalf because they might get quite angry." I always remembered that and it was absolutely true. I made that my focus, to ask them at the end of a conversation what they want to expect you to do, and then be very clear about what you can and what you can't actually do for them. I think people appreciate that in the end, because sometimes there is nothing to be done. Fiona, of course, made a huge impact as the assistant secretary before me, particularly in the area of special education which was her real interest, and she went on, of course, to work in the department in that capacity. Towards the end of my time there, if you remember, I wrote a research paper on the subject of the integration of children with special needs in classroom environments. That was done after lengthy consultation with the teachers working in the area. It was a paper that perhaps was not to Fiona's taste, but it did manage to get us extra financial support for teachers working in that area. Because they were feeling rather beleaguered, I think, by the challenges of working with kids with special needs.

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**Mr Haggar:** **Fiona used to take me to the special schools on a deliberate annual I'll use the term tour, it's probably inappropriate, but just to remind me of the very difficult role that special education teachers had in those schools and in special units. I think it reinforced the need to give them that extra degree of recognition and support.**

**Ms Trinca:** Yes. Look, there were a lot of good people working there. I enjoyed very much working with the organisers, too, in schools. So we had Bill Book and Peter Kent and other people. All in all, I think that the union office was a really good place to work, you know.

**Mr Haggar:** **Yes. It certainly - looking at the fact that you were there largely during the Howard years, and the kinds of attacks on funding and on the status of teachers that we faced, it certainly was a challenging period. Of course, in the last 10 years the union has been able to substantially increase its membership and do some excellent enterprise bargaining agreements, but also, too, I think has been able to build on the early work that we did. In part because we fought, for example, the 2006 dispute to the absolute extent that we could, The union has faced different issues with the current government, which of course is a continuation of the Stanhope Government of that period. It has not had to face the direct threats from the federal government. It's been more ongoing battles like the overall funding of schools and, of course, in recent times, what to do for schools and for teachers in the face of COVID. But unless there's some other additional comments you'd like to make, Robin, I think, if it's all right, we might bring this discussion to a close.**

**Ms Trinca:** Indeed, okay, let's do that. If there's anything else, I might pop it in, in the transcript.

**Mr Haggar:** **Right, I'll just end the discussion at the moment on the recorder.**

[End of Transcript]