Wayne Swan has reopened the republic debate as he invoked the spirit of Labor legend Mick Young to urge Labor to "stick together" as the government battles low morale amid disastrous opinion poll results.

"The time has come that we renew a respectful national conversation about us moving to become an Australian republic," he said last night.

Delivering the Mick Young scholarship dinner speech, the Treasurer rejected the argument used to defend Australia's current system -- "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". "The fact is, by any credible yardstick, it is broken," he said. "This isn't to say our democracy doesn't tick along and operate well: that is clearly the case and beyond contest. But how else can you describe a system that sees a country as successful and proud as ours unable to supply its own head of state? It doesn't add up. Particularly not now, well into our second century as a nation."

Mr Swan said he did not believe in inherited privilege. "The very idea of a title taken by birthright runs completely at odds with the value of achievement based on merit," he said. He also called on Tony Abbott to back the Gonski education reforms after Victoria and Queensland's governments threatened to go it alone.

"My message to Mr Abbott tonight is simple: the Gonski reforms have been designed by non-political people in a spirit of goodwill, with the intention of advancing the national interest.

"So put the negative politics aside, do the right thing by the generation of tomorrow and stop inciting the Liberal states to undermine the schools agreement to the detriment of their states' children."

As Julia Gillard prepares to embark on a crucial blitz of western Sydney to revive Labor fortunes in its electoral heartland, Mr Swan described the Prime Minister as "my friend". "She's helped fill part of the void I feel every day since Mick passed on," he said.

His comments came amid despair among some MPs at the handling of Ms Gillard's western Sydney trip after her plans to stay at Rooty Hill in the western suburbs instead of Kirribilli House were leaked. Mental Health Minister Mark Butler was also forced to apologise for making fun of the Rooty Hill name.

With some MPs, including supporters, expressing doubts that Labor can win the next election, pressure is growing on Ms Gillard to generate some political momentum from the trip.

Ms Gillard will begin the trip with an address at the University of Western Sydney tomorrow. A full Cabinet meeting will be held in Blacktown on Monday. Mr Abbott is expected to join the political war for western Sydney next week by making his own appearances in the area.