

Malcolm Turnbull tries to move from mess to message

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Malcolm Turnbull has acted quickly to get his [main political message back on track](#) and avoid the distraction created by the failed flirtation with giving income tax powers to the states.

The Prime Minister yesterday moved to blame the premiers for the failure of the biggest change in federation for generations and shift the focus to necessary cuts to health and education funding, and, more importantly, to Bill Shorten.

Turnbull's weekend script was tighter and more defined than during his dalliance with the politically dangerous "double taxation" last week.

It needed to be.

On Wednesday, Turnbull unveiled a proposal to profoundly change federal funding powers and force the states to be accountable for the taxes they raised and spent.

Its lack of detail, commitment and success left Turnbull up another dry gully on tax reform and handed Labor the deadly line that he wanted to introduce "double taxation" while cutting federal funding to health and entirely to state schools.

If it was intended to be a distraction, it worked — but the risks were enormous. If Turnbull succeeded in getting consideration for the scheme, he would be hounded throughout the election campaign.

If he failed, which he did, he risked looking confused on tax policy while still giving Labor ammunition.

Yesterday, he turned his attention to cleaning up the patchy performance and getting back on track.

First, he blamed the premiers for the failure and accused them of lacking responsibility in spending and, second, he reinforced the fundamental fact that Julia Gillard's so-called \$80 billion for education and health was unfunded.

Urging restraint from everyone who doesn't want to put up taxes, Turnbull was pointing the finger at the states and warning that the 2014 budget "cuts" — which had caused Tony Abbott so much political damage — were not cuts at all, but reductions in promises that were unfunded.

Then Turnbull got back to pushing the importance of the building industry watchdog and the need for the Senate to pass it or face a double-dissolution election in which he would be linking the Opposition Leader and Labor to discredited unions.

Turnbull hasn't managed to stop the premiers blaming the commonwealth, hasn't stopped Labor continuing to claim he supports double taxation and hasn't unveiled a tax policy.

But at least he's pulled back from what was overreach on state income taxing powers.