

Turnbull parts with funds but political cost greater

Dennis Shanahan, The Australian, 12:00AM June 22, 2017

Malcolm Turnbull appears to have had a victory in getting the school funding package through the Senate but it is a victory that has come at a high dollar and political cost.

The Prime Minister had no choice but to get his Gonski 2.0 education package through the parliament this week before the long winter break and the crossbench senators knew it. As a result they have wrung another \$5 billion out of the government and other “special deals” aimed at helping the state and Catholic education systems.

But the political price threatens to be even greater: another segment of the Coalition base is angry and threatening revolt.

Despite the concessions the Catholic education system remains at “war” with the Coalition and threatens to campaign through to the next election.

Once again Turnbull has succeeded in getting legislation through the hostile Senate but has part of the Coalition support base up in arms against it.

Catholic school leaders are using advertising, robo-calls to homes and old-fashioned canteen and pulpit talk to defy the government and declare fees will rise at poorer systemic schools.

At the same time Bill Shorten has implacably opposed the entire package, including the concessions, and travels the nation attending forums and parent meetings in Coalition-held seats to demonstrate ALP support for Catholic schools. The Greens have just dealt themselves out entirely.

But it was Liberal backbenchers threatening to cross the floor in the House of Representatives and the Senate who helped force the concessions as they tried to keep their connection to local communities and a vital Coalition support base.

For decades support for non-state schools has been a tenet of Menzies-induced faith in the Liberal Party which helped draw Catholics away from a traditional union-Labor alliance towards an aspirational Coalition.

What’s more, while Catholic education accounts for more than 20 per cent of Australian schoolchildren, about 20 per cent of them are non-Catholics.

A lack of initial consultation and a proper appreciation of the place of the low-fee Catholic schools in Australian society has led to this diabolic solution that costs more and doesn’t satisfy the main protagonist.