

INQUIRER

Turnbull ignores No voters after same-sex bill is passed



Liberal MP Tim Wilson hugs Malcolm Turnbull after the vote. Picture: AAP

Dennis Shanahan, *The Australian*, 12:00AM December 9, 2017

As Malcolm Turnbull stood at the parliamentary dispatch box for the final reading of the same-sex marriage bill on Thursday, he ecstatically declared it a great day, pumped the air and played to the public galleries draped in rainbow flags and packed with people who had sat through hours of debate.

Yet the Prime Minister's euphoria and enthusiasm were not matched by many of the Coalition MPs sitting behind him, particularly by about 15 of his colleagues who abstained from the final vote and watched their leader on television in the MPs' private lobby.

The cold, hard fact for Turnbull is that while the same-sex marriage legislation was passed overwhelmingly, on the issue of extra religious freedoms, which he had promised during the campaign, he was isolated from the vast majority of his Coalition colleagues.

More than 80 Coalition members in both houses spoke and voted in favour of religious freedom amendments. The 61.6 per cent vote in favour of same-sex marriage in the postal survey meant it was going to become law; the remaining

issue, and the focus of this week's parliamentary debate, was religious protection.

The success of the postal survey, the clear win for the Yes vote, the easy passage of the same-sex marriage laws and the end of the legislative debate is a great plus for Turnbull, but there was meant to be an even greater political dividend in a Coalition defence of religious freedoms. Yet Turnbull, who promised "extensive" protections for religious freedom in September and reaffirmed his position last weekend, did not speak on any and voted for only three amendments.

In September, in response to a challenge from John Howard on the matter, Turnbull said: "I just want to reassure Australians that as strongly as I believe in the right of same-sex couples to marry ... even more strongly, if you like, do I believe in religious freedom. "Religious freedom is fundamental and it will be protected in any bill that emerges from this parliament."

Yet when push came to shove, Turnbull fell short of the expectations he fuelled last weekend, dropping any plan to speak during the debate on religious protections. He abstained from two votes and concentrated on celebrating the passage of same-sex marriage.

In a continuing failure to reach out to conservative voters — and this is not some affluent white Anglo-Saxon enclave of privileged Liberal voters unhappy about their superannuation or the removal of Tony Abbott but a huge tranche of migrant, middle and working-class Labor voters in western Sydney and regional Australia — Turnbull paid only fleeting heed to their concerns.

On the other side, again demonstrating a political acuity that is beyond Turnbull, Bill Shorten included No voters in his speech in front of adoring crowds, and within hours of the law being passed had already appealed to people of all faiths in the vast areas of suburban Sydney that voted No. It was the Opposition Leader who sent out a signal to religious and conservative voters generally, saying: "I say to those who voted No, I recognise that now is the time for healing, to put this debate behind us. And when this law is passed, we should declare that we are no longer a nation of people who voted No or people who voted Yes — we are simply Australians, one and all."

He also wrote to the religious leaders of all faiths who represent those in the sweep of Labor seats through southwest and western Sydney who voted No,

declaring that Labor in “opposition or government” would seek to help them with religious freedoms. The resounding No vote in nine Labor electorates in Sydney — Barton, Blaxland, Chifley, Fowler, Greenway, McMahon, Parramatta, Watson and Werriwa — is a golden opportunity for the Coalition to regain ground it held in the days of the Howard battlers.

Already bleeding in Queensland after the state election, the Coalition cannot afford to pass up an opportunity in another important state. Yet it is Shorten writing to bishops and muftis in the area, offering to meet them and “discuss your concerns”. Labor is taking the opportunity to become the party of religious protection going into the next election.

This was not meant to happen. Labor’s blanket opposition to any amendments to the original bill to expand religious protections was meant to provide the Coalition with the opportunity to attract the more than four million No voters to its side. Instead, Shorten used Turnbull’s inquiry into religious freedom as a relief valve for Labor’s conscientious objectors as well as a means of appealing to religious leaders.

Nor is Shorten ignoring the pent-up anger among Catholic and other religious schools over what they see as a funding betrayal under the Coalition’s Gonski 2.0 education funding model. Coalition ministers were warning the Catholic hierarchy earlier this year that supporting Labor on school funding and helping Shorten become prime minister would mean “you’ll get same-sex marriage within two weeks of the election”. That’s now an empty threat as Turnbull claims a historic victory on same-sex marriage and accuses Labor of trying to claim credit for the new law.

Already in the by-election in Bennelong (which the Liberals seem confident of holding), non-state-school funding is an element in the Labor campaign. The earlier storm over Catholic school funding — where ministers accused Catholic leaders of lying and welcomed attacks from an institution under siege over child sexual abuse — is merging with outrage over the lack of religious protections alongside the same-sex marriage legislation.

Yet Turnbull remains defiantly exultant and incapable of appealing to a large part of his party and the base of Coalition voters. Shorten recognises the threat to Labor over support for same-sex marriage and is seeking to address it almost simultaneously with claiming victory. Understandably, Turnbull was relieved and delighted to be “the first Prime Minister of Australia to be

committed to legalising same-sex marriage” and that he was being showered with accolades for a historic win and “an everlasting legacy” for his leadership.

It came at the end of a week in which Labor’s attack on the Coalition’s one-seat parliamentary majority unravelled, with Barnaby Joyce returning triumphantly after his victory in the New England by-election, while Labor senator Sam Dastyari was being referred to the privileges committee over allegations of warning a Chinese national he was under ASIO surveillance.

For a Liberal leader facing enormous pressure and cabinet leaks, forced to cancel a sitting of the House of Representatives to avoid humiliation on the floor of the parliament, forced to backflip on a banking royal commission, outfoxed by Shorten for so long and still trailing in the polls, it was as if a large stone had been lifted from his chest: same-sex marriage was resolved and out of the way.

It meant Turnbull, despite various predictions, would survive until Christmas and into the new year, with the opportunity to reset the Coalition agenda and cement his leadership.

In the plethora of interviews he gave yesterday that overwhelmingly concentrated on the “great day”, Turnbull occasionally referred to getting on with the job and what to do next year. “We’ve done a huge amount, we’ve got more to do, and 2018 is going to see a year where we’re focused on ensuring we’re backing those hardworking Australian families and businesses,” he said. Turnbull is working towards improved numbers in the next Newspoll survey, the last before Christmas, on the back of being the Prime Minister who passed same-sex marriage — but one who still faces substantial obstacles, including an apparent inability, not just reluctance, to appeal to the No voters.

As well, Turnbull’s euphoria was not seen sympathetically by some same-sex marriage supporters. Magda Szubanski, a leading Yes campaigner, said: “To see the Prime Minister gloating and taking credit was a little bit hard to swallow, when really every obstacle has been put in the way of this happening and he’s caved in to all of it.”

Turnbull is ending the year on a high, but he should be wary of what could turn out to be a Gillard reprieve, where a pre-Christmas boost keeps alive for a few months a leader who then disappears into a swamp, in the absence of policy initiatives and clear leadership. Julia Gillard’s gains were always cut back by

new crises, missed opportunities, her vulnerability to the parliamentary chaos of minority government, and a brazen opposition leader with more political nous.