

Australian parliament's late-night "Gonski" sitting highlights political instability

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Desperate to get at least one significant measure through before a six-week winter recess, the Turnbull government kept the parliament sitting until 2.08 a.m. this morning to secure the passage of the "Gonski 2.0" school-funding bill.

The Australian Education Amendment Bill cuts funding by some \$17 billion over 10 years compared to the empty promises made by the previous Greens-backed Labor government. At the same time, it continues the running down of public schools that Labor's "Gonski" blueprint accelerated, driving increasing numbers of students into private schools.

After weeks of backroom deal-making and a marathon two-day debate, the bill was finally rubberstamped by the Senate with the support of 10 of the 12 right-wing populists in the chamber, led by the four senators of Pauline Hanson's One Nation and three from the Nick Xenophon Team.

Labor and the Greens opposed the bill, fraudulently posturing as champions of public education and social equity despite putting in place the 2013 Gonski framework that the Liberal-National government has adopted to deepen the assault on public schools. Labor's scheme was proposed by leading business figure David Gonski, who publicly endorsed its updating by the current government.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull today heralded the victory as "the biggest reform in Commonwealth school funding ever," achieving "consistent, needs-based funding right across the country."

Turnbull and his ministers claimed that the win proved that his government could push ahead with running the country, despite holding a one-seat majority in the House of Representatives and just 29 seats in the 76-member Senate.

In reality, the horse-trading that the government undertook, right up to the last-minute, to get the bill

through the Senate only underscored the tenuous character of Turnbull's leadership, the fragility of his Liberal-National Coalition and the instability of the entire parliamentary establishment.

Key bills remain stalled because of the continuing public hostility to the government's pro-business agenda and which saw it almost defeated at last July's double dissolution election. These include measures to slash welfare and higher education, impose reactionary restrictions on citizenship and permit greater monopolisation of the corporate media. Labor, the Greens and the Senate "crossbenchers" fear the electoral backlash if they vote for them.

The only other major legislation to pass this year has been the data retention bill, backed by Labor, to allow the police and intelligence agencies to legally monitor everyone's social media activities, and the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) Bill, which provides for the coercive questioning and jailing of construction workers for taking industrial action.

Labor and the Greens, while claiming to oppose the government's austerity program, including its May 9 budget, backed the passage of the main budget appropriation bills, as they have every year, permitting the government to keep functioning.

Some inkling of the political volatility was provided by Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, which reported that "Education Minister Simon Birmingham spent a nerve-racking day locking in the 10 votes" needed in the Senate to pass the "Gonski 2.0" bill.

Earlier in the week, one of the government's own backbenchers, Senator Chris Back, also threatened to cross the floor to oppose the bill on the basis that it would lead to cuts in Roman Catholic schools.

Another right-wing MP, George Christensen, did cross the floor on another bill, ostensibly to oppose the slashing of workers' after-hours penalty wage rates, although he

did so knowing that his vote would not give the opposition a majority, let alone bring down the government.

To secure the Senate votes for the school bill, the government made a series of deals. It pledged an extra \$5 billion in funding over 10 years, promised to bring forward some spending over six years, rather than ten, and gave the Catholic education authorities an additional \$50 million over the next 12 months.

There will also be an “independent” agency to supposedly oversee the scheme. This was proposed by the Greens, whose leaders originally supported the bill but then backtracked. They became nervous about the hostility of teachers to the measures, as well as the wider electoral consequences of too openly coming to the government’s rescue.

The crisis in the Greens further highlighted the political turmoil.

According to some media reports, the Greens would have split if the party’s leader, Senator Richard Di Natale and its education spokesperson, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, had insisted on voting for the bill. Senator Lee Rhiannon and her faction opposed the legislation, acutely conscious of the popular disaffection with the government and the need to retain a parliamentary safety valve for the growing discontent.

“Gonski 2.0” will intensify the offensive against public schools and teachers that the last Labor government launched. Over 10 years, only 41.6 percent of federal funding will go to government schools, compared to 58.4 percent to private schools, including the wealthiest ones catering for the corporate elite.

Promised funding increases for the poorest schools in working-class areas are delayed for years, but all funding has been tied immediately to measures undermining teachers’ job security and conditions. These include so-called school improvement schemes and annual teacher “performance reviews,” linked to Labor’s hated NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) standardised testing regime.

NAPLAN has effectively narrowed the curriculum, in order to meet corporate demands for a more productive workforce, while paving the way for the closure of public schools that are deemed “underperforming.” Continuing poor NAPLAN results, especially in the most disadvantaged schools, are being exploited to convince more students and their parents to shift to private schools, where they pay ever-higher fees.

Having enforced this program under Labor, including

by blocking teachers’ boycotts of NAPLAN, the Australian Education Union (AEU), the trade union covering public school teachers, has joined Labor and the Greens in opposing the Coalition’s extension of the Gonski regime. The union’s attempt to now depict itself as a defender of public education and teachers’ rights displays its contempt for its own members. The AEU bureaucrats are intent on corraling teachers behind the return of yet another reactionary, pro-corporate Labor or Labor-Greens government.

The financial elite is scathing in its condemnation of the deals the government struck to pass the school bill. With the economy officially close to recession because of the implosion of the mining boom, and amid signs of the collapse of a five-year property market bubble, the corporate media is increasingly alarmed by the Turnbull government’s failure to push through its agenda.

Today’s *Australian Financial Review* lashed the government for “whacking an additional \$5 billion over 10 years on the tab with a federal budget with a deficit of \$36 billion last year.” It warned: “The international credit ratings agencies are watching the Australian budget closely. Every slippage indicates that the government is not serious about getting its finances under control. This month it’s education. What about next?”

In yesterday’s *Australian*, contributing editor Peter Van Onselen warned that Turnbull’s government faced “long winter of discontent.” With opinion polls continuing to show the Coalition heading for a major defeat at the next election, he reported: “MPs are starting to discuss openly how much longer the present polling quagmire can be tolerated.”

Turnbull’s only protection from another party leadership coup, similar to the one by which Turnbull replaced Tony Abbott in September 2015, was that there was “no ready-made alternative with whom to replace him.”

In this context, Labor and the Greens, backed by the AEU and the rest of the trade union movement, are trying to channel the political disaffection and social unrest in the working class behind the election of a Labor-led government that would seek to impose the requirements of the corporate ruling class.



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