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Catholics and Carr wary of school chaplains plan

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CATHOLIC schools have raised fears of government interference in their religious affairs after John Howard pledged \$90 million for school chaplains, a move the former premier, Bob Carr, called a retrograde and divisive threat to the separation of church and state.

The Catholic schools sector says a requirement for the Federal Government to vet each appointment will make it think twice about the Prime Minister's plan.

Mr Howard said yesterday that all schools could apply for \$20,000 a year towards the cost of chaplains to provide "pastoral care and spiritual guidance".

Worried about giving the Government veto over staff, particularly in spiritual matters, the director of the NSW Catholic Education Commission, Brian Croke, said: "This would be unprecedented, I would suggest."

Mr Carr said the chaplain plan should be abandoned, as it breached the church-and-state principle, would require taxpayers to finance religious activities, and would fuel religious disputes in schools.

He said there were about 50 Sydney schools with a predominantly Islamic student roll, and asked what would happen if a pro-jihad imam was appointed.

"There will be a steady diet of anti-discrimination actions as a result of this piece of Federal Government policy," he said.

With the prospect of debates over chaplain appointments between Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Muslims, Jewish and non-Jewish and liberals and fundamentalists, "it means plunging parent bodies into disputes over religion. I could not think of a more retrograde policy decision," Mr Carr said.

It would mean "taxpayers will be called on to fund religious activities in schools" when there were other pressing needs for funding for child protection programs, drug and alcohol education and to fight indigenous disadvantage.

"One of the sunniest facts about modern Australia is the tolerance that arises from living in a secular society," he said.

The Opposition education spokeswoman, Jenny Macklin, said Labor supported the chaplaincy program, but said: "Any new chaplaincy program must be flexible enough to take into account the diversity of religious beliefs in our school systems." The scheme, budgeted to cost \$90 million over three years, requires schools to contribute some of the cost. Federal funding would be limited to \$20,000 a year per school, regardless of the number of chaplains appointed.

Mr Howard said he did not think there was anything sensitive about the proposed checking of chaplains, including Muslims.

"I think it's just common sense ... the great majority of people will support this as a very sensible initiative and I am quite sure that Islamic schools and Jewish schools will be as enthusiastic about this as Catholic and Protestant schools."

But the Government reserved the right "to say no to somebody who is plainly unacceptable".

Judy King, the principal of Riverside Girls High School in Gladesville, said she agreed with Mr Howard about the need for more support for students in crisis, but what was needed were more social workers.

"Why do we need to bring religion into it? We are a secular society," she said.

Ms King said there were 48 different cultural backgrounds among the students at her school and she was quite sure the school would not support the recruitment of a chaplain.

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