Old boys get a stinging lesson on core values

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If Henry Gallagher, a year-12 student at Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview, in Sydney, reduced his heartfelt message to Tony Abbott, one of the school's best-known old boys, to a five-word slogan, it would be something like: "Remember where you came from."

As Tony Abbott and another Riverview alumnus, Barnaby Joyce, prepare for the prospect of filling two of the most senior positions in a Coalition government after September 7, students at their alma mater are alarmed that they have forsaken the Jesuit values that underpinned their education.

Led by Henry, 17, the students have expressed dismay at what they describe as the betrayal of those values by both sides of politics and appealed for policies that promote "a more moral and a more just Australia."

To ensure that the message hit home, they sent a letter penned by Henry and a petition of 450 signatures (most of them Riverview students) by courier to the electorate offices of the two old boys and three other prominent MPs with a Jesuit education: the Liberal Party's Joe Hockey and Christopher Pyne and Labor's Bill Shorten.

"We feel compelled to express our disappointment that, as graduates of our Jesuit schools, you would allow those principles, cultivated in our common tradition, to be betrayed," Henry writes.

"We look for heroes among our alumni, for insignes [generous and influential people, as Ignatius styled them]. Instead we see only allegiances to parties that trade human lives for political expediency, that choose the lowest common denominator to woo the populace, and that speak of economic problems rather than the dignity of the human person, especially the most vulnerable."

The letter says the policies of the Coalition and Labor "betray our national character of being large-hearted, of giving someone 'a fair go', and of 'helping the battler'. They lack moral courage and, in the light of our international obligations, may be illegal."

In between trial exams, Henry said a catalyst for the action had been hearing the stories of refugees who attend Riverview on scholarships. "Knowing firsthand the direct conflicts they have faced and seeing politicians making decisions that aren't taking into account humanity made us very upset.

"We wanted to evoke the feeling of what they experienced at Riverview and try to remind them that, when it comes right down to it, it's not about making decisions based on politics. It's about trying to come back to core values."

"We think it's important to remind Tony Abbott, as a very outspoken Catholic, that he should take Jesuit ideals into account in his decisions."

Although he did not expect to change the policies of the major parties before the election, he did hope to encourage a conversation inside the party rooms on the need for moral courage and generosity of spirit.

One less than encouraging omen is that, two weeks after writing, he is yet to receive a single reply.