

Grattan on Friday: Morrison ticks the boxes but can't hide the dysfunction

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Scott Morrison is approaching a prime ministership that fell into his lap in the tactical manner you might expect from the NSW Liberal party director he once was. Take this week.

First, he seized the Howard barnacle scraper, dumping the plan to lift the pension eligibility age to 70. Not because it was bad policy, but because it could lose votes.

Then there was the “back to Menzies” speech. All Liberal leaders feel the need to touch those spiritual bones – this time that came with a pilgrimage to Albury, the site of one of the party’s founding conferences.

Invoking Menzies is a gesture to the faithful. But Morrison’s preacher-style stump speech sent some wider messages.

We heard again his mantra of “a fair go for those who have a go”. The exhortation to “make a contribution, not to seek one” is a version of Joe Hockey’s “lifters and leaners” (which Hockey got from Menzies).

“We’ve got to look after our mates”, Morrison said, to flag he believes in the social safety net and Medicare.

There was a pitch about inclusion: “you love all Australians if you love Australia” - whether they “rocked up” in chains like his forebears or arrived last week.

And as for the peskies who demand gestures like getting out of the Paris climate accord: don’t worry about Paris, he’s saying, “we’ll absolutely be able to deal with our present target out to 2030 with no impact on electricity prices at all.”

In his neat must-do list, Morrison has already visited both a drought area and our most

Grattan on Friday: Morrison ticks the boxes but can't hide the dysfunction

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

important big neighbour. He spurned some little neighbours by bypassing the Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru, a difficult meeting, given their views about climate change, and the backdrop of refugees. But he'd reckon Australian voters wouldn't care or even notice that he didn't go.

In copybook terms, it's hard to fault Morrison's first fortnight, if you can get past his description of events that tore down a PM as "that Muppet Show", and swallow any cynicism about his carefully crafted choreography.

But stand back, and you see a wider shambles.

The leaks this week have been prolific, distracting and damaging.

The Liberal women are seriously up in arms, about both bullying and female under-representation.

The blokes felt they could dismiss the complaints of backbenchers Julia Banks and Lucy Gichuhi, either by denying their substance or with platitudes. But the coup had blown the lid off longer-held grievances and created some fresh deep resentment.

The Minister for Women, Kelly O'Dwyer, weighed in, followed by Julie Bishop. If Bishop is on your political tail, be very afraid.

In a swingeing speech the former Liberal deputy condemned unacceptable behaviour in Canberra, flatly rejected the "nothing to see here, move on" line, and delivered a tough message on women.

"I say to my party ... it is not acceptable for us to have in 2018 less than 25% of our parliamentarians as female. It is not acceptable for our party to contribute to the fall in Australia's ratings from 15th in the world in terms of female parliamentarian representation in 1999, to 50th today", Bishop said.

On another front, the controversy over Peter Dutton's use of his ministerial discretion in granting visas to au pairs is spinning out of control. While he's the one in the political dock, it is a collective problem because Dutton – the coup instigator – remains a senior minister.

The issue is whether Dutton's decisions were responses to representations from people he knew. He had denied any personal links but information contradicting that denial has come out.

The au pair affair on Thursday burst into a bitter public fight between Dutton and his former Australian Border Force chief Roman Quaadvlieg.

Quaadvlieg wrote to the Senate inquiry into Dutton's conduct claiming that in June 2015 he was called by Dutton's chief of staff, Craig Maclachlan, who said "the boss's mate in Brisbane" had run into a problem with a prospective au pair - she had been detained over her visa. The "boss's mate" was a man Dutton had worked with in the Queensland police force.

In a blistering counter attack, Dutton accused Quaadvlieg of "fabrication of evidence to a Senate committee". Dutton said Maclachlan didn't even work for him at the time; he also suggested Quaadvlieg had mental health issues.

Apart from the au pair affair, a question mark remains over whether Dutton could be in breach of the constitution's section 44, relating to pecuniary interests, because of a family trust that gets funds from a child care business, which in turn receives government moneys.

At a policy level, the Morrison government has a serious gap at the heart of its agenda.

A few weeks ago the Turnbull government was on the brink of clinching a National Energy Guarantee that commanded wide support from business and opened the prospect of providing investment certainty. Now energy policy is back to chaos.

The emerging policy is little more than a collection of "big sticks", including threatened

divestment and even a possible royal commission, designed to force companies to lower prices.

Some on the Liberal right and among the hardline commentariat continue to make withdrawal from Paris a benchmark. Morrison won't do that but his attitude is, please let's not talk emissions. At the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia sought to water down the climate language.

As for certainty, there is less than before and without doubt much less than the NEG promised.

Sarah McNamara, CEO of the Australian Energy Council, which represents generators and retailers, says recent events have "impacted negatively [on investment prospects] because the uncertainty we have been dealing with now looks set to continue.

"And it's dawning on us that the critical bipartisanship that's needed may be impossible to achieve even in the medium term".

As we move towards an election, certainty on another front will come front and centre.

Morrison, the ultimate pragmatist, will throw everything at winning. But if he managed to do so, against the odds, how would he govern after the election?

In the early days of the Turnbull government, Morrison was casting himself as a reformer, including promoting changes to the GST. But he is not expected to go to next year's election with a robust reform program.

If he has a small-target strategy, Labor will claim he's the wolf in sheep's clothing – a classic scare campaign. Morrison will have to convince voters his word is his bond.

Would a re-elected Morrison have a new tack post election? He wouldn't be the first PM to say

Grattan on Friday: Morrison ticks the boxes but can't hide the dysfunction

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

one thing pre poll and another afterwards. But on the other hand he saw what happened to Tony Abbott when he broke his pre-election promises. He never got over it. Malcolm Turnbull was always careful in sticking to his pledges.

If before the election Morrison locks himself out of a serious reform agenda, the hands of a post-election Coalition government would be tied – unless Morrison were willing to go back on his undertakings and risk the consequences.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-morrison-ticks-the-boxes-but-cant-hide-the-dysfunction-102805>