

## Grattan on Friday: Morrison aims to make agility his prime ministerial trademark

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Strawberries and hay have provided unlikely lenses for an insight into how Scott Morrison will conduct his prime ministership from now to the election.

The needles-in-the-berries contamination has been alarming for consumers and devastating for the industry. Anyone involved deserves the full force of the quite heavy penalties available, and the public should be encouraged to eat (with due care) this delicious fruit.

But when the government rolls out the Prime Minister, the Attorney-General, the Home Affairs Minister, the Australian Federal Police chief and the Border Force Commissioner, and then rushes new legislation through parliament in a single day – well, you know a political point is being made.

A serious crime was turned into a national crisis. MPs donned aprons, grabbed knives and started slicing.

The legislation naturally received bipartisan support, with little discussion of whether the changes are actually needed. Its extremely hasty passage was despite the fact it won't apply retrospectively to this criminal action.

As the strawberry crisis gripped the parliament, we're reminded how rapidly a government can escalate an issue. In this case, the worst that could be said is that it's an over-reaction with a political vibe. But you don't need much imagination to think how a similar drama could be concocted with darker motives.

As for the hay: this was an announcement of liberalised rules for carting fodder so more could be sent faster to drought-affected farmers. Normally you'd expect a ministerial press release. Morrison turned it into a prime ministerial occasion, on Thursday being photographed climbing into a truck somewhere outside Canberra.

Earlier in the week, he'd called a "drought summit" for next month. Dealing with the drought has

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been one of his central themes, from his first news conference, followed by his interview on Australia All Over, and his visit to see things on the ground in Queensland.

These examples – and the very important one of the weekend announcement of a royal commission into aged care – show Morrison’s style. He will pick up and run with whatever is around - issues he sees as resonating with ordinary people.

“Scott likes to move quickly”, says a colleague. He’s not – if he can help it - going to get caught having to respond to others’ agendas. The royal commission was announced a day before the ABC’s aged care expose.

Morrison is also clearing away irritants as rapidly as possible. Thursday’s \$4.6 billion decade-long package for private schools drew a line under the damaging row between the government and the vociferous Catholic sector. Negotiations have been underway for some time, but the deal’s now landed.

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**Read more:** [Government unfurls \\$4.6 billion private schools package, calming Catholic critics](#)

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Morrison won’t get bogged down in process. When he recently dumped the commitment to increasing the pension age to 70, he acted before the full cabinet had ratified what was a significant policy shift.

The new PM is tactically quicker than Malcolm Turnbull, just as in his messaging he can cut through with greater sharpness. He’s more attuned to the emotional and knee-jerk drivers of today’s politics, in the age of the continuous news cycle and social media. Malcolm liked to mull over moves.

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He is also freer to act than his predecessor, who was hemmed in by enemies as well as allies of convenience, like Peter Dutton, who turned into enemies.

For the Liberals, Morrison is the end of the pre-election leadership line, and that gives him a good deal of latitude to set his own course. He might be displeasing the hard right Liberals by not exiting the Paris climate agreement, but he's able to stare them down or fob them off. They know he's in the seat until the election.

Defining your opponent can be critical in our semi-presidential contests. "The Prime Minister is a blank canvass", says one Labor man. "Both sides are trying to fill in the colours".

Morrison's brush strokes on his own portrait are designed to create the image of a leader tuned to the voters' concerns, rather than the "Canberra bubble". If sometimes this makes him look more like the mayor of Albury than the prime minister of Australia – well, he just hopes it works. Like the latecomer desperately working the room, he knows he has practically no time.

In his one departure from pragmatism during these first prime ministerial weeks, Morrison has flagged he's willing to stir the hornets' nest of religious freedom. Although unclear about the problem, he told Sky on Monday "there's nothing wrong with a bit of preventative regulation and legislation". Especially given the time constraints, it's hard to see that battle is worth the likely costs.

To highlight Morrison's agility and hyper-activity is not to overlook the government's parlous situation, with a sour electorate, a still-shocked backbench, divisions in the ranks, all sorts of trouble over the "women problem", and the uncertainty of the Wentworth byelection.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*View from The Hill: Morrison's challenge with women goes beyond simple numbers\*\*\*](#)

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It's rather to say, the way the game's being played has changed. Labor is alert to this, wondering, for instance, whether Morrison will appeal to some of its male "battler" type voters.

The PM said in question time on Thursday that Bill Shorten "isn't looking as certain as he was two weeks ago." Despite the political bonuses being handed almost daily to Labor, this is probably true. The opposition is still seeking to get its fix on its new opponent.

However Morrison goes over coming months, this week should give the Liberals cause to reflect that they had a lucky escape when Dutton failed to get the numbers in the coup he started.

The Senate inquiry into the au pair affair, which reported on Wednesday, was dominated by Labor and the Greens, so it was always set to produce a majority report very critical of Dutton. Even allowing for that, a couple of things are clear from the facts of the two cases the inquiry examined.

In assisting these women, Dutton did go above and beyond what would normally have been expected – all stops were pulled out. And he did mislead parliament when he denied any personal connections.

In the case of the woman who landed in Brisbane, he had a past acquaintanceship (via their mutual police service) with her prospective employer.

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**Read more:** [\*\*Dutton back in spotlight after split Senate report on au pair affair\*\*](#)

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But misleading parliament is no longer taken seriously. Morrison's certainly not going to worry that his Home Affairs Minister – who has oversight of the independent agencies of the Australian Federal Police and ASIO – did not tell parliament the truth. Canberra bubble and all that.

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Anyway, Morrison has a lot to thank Dutton for. After all, Dutton delivered him the prime ministership.

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

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