

Grattan on Friday: Hokey-pokey politics as the government is shaken all about

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

In the topsy turvy Liberal universe, just when the right is trying to tighten its grip on the throat of the party, the government is haring off to the left, with this week's legislation to allow it to break up recalcitrant energy companies.

As former deputy Liberal leader Julie Bishop - who as a backbencher has become very forthright - said in the Coalition party room on Tuesday, "this is not orthodox Liberal policy". Bishop canvassed the danger of sovereign risk.

To find a rationale for a frolic into what in other circumstances the Liberals would no doubt denounce as "socialism", one might see it as driven by the veto of the so-called conservatives.

Those on the right (led by Tony Abbott and his band) have long stopped the government putting forward a sound energy policy, despite the strong pleas from stakeholders across the board.

Instead, trying to respond to the pressing electoral issue of high electricity prices, the government has reached for its "big stick" including the threat of divestiture - a policy that's being attacked by Labor as well as business.

Shadow treasurer Chris Bowen was correct on Thursday when he said: "this is what we see when a government's policy agenda falls apart".

Having to defend this draconian policy, first from critical Coalition backbenchers (who won some changes) and then in parliament, the government found itself tied in knots.

Given this is such a radical proposal, it was also in an enormous rush with the legislation, introducing it on Wednesday and wanting the House of Representatives to pass it by Thursday.

But that timetable was stymied by Labor. Passage through the House will have to wait until

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February.

Meanwhile there will be a Senate inquiry, reporting in March. This puts off a Senate vote until budget week in April - ensuring a lot of noise about this controversial measure just when the government will want all the attention on a budget crafted to appeal to voters for a May election.

Even if the divestiture legislation gets through the Senate next year, a likely Labor election victory would mean we'll probably never see this particular "big stick" wielded. It's highly doubtful the threat will have been worth the angst, or the trashing of Liberal principles.

The final parliamentary fortnight of 2018 coincided with the first fortnight of the hung parliament.

For Scott Morrison, it has been an excruciating two weeks, with the backlash from the Liberals' trouncing in Victoria, Julia Banks' defection to the crossbench, Malcolm Turnbull's provocative interventions, and an impasse with Labor over the plan to protect LGBT students.

The government's stress culminated in Thursday's extraordinary battle to prevent a defeat on the floor of the House.

This test of strength was over amendments, based on a proposal originally coming from new Wentworth member Kerryn Phelps, that would make it easier to transfer people needing medical treatment from Nauru and Manus to Australia.

As both sides played the tactics, a remarkable thing happened in the House of Representatives. Behaviour improved one hundred percent, with none of the usual screaming and exchanges of insults. This pleasing development was, unsurprisingly, driven by cynicism – neither government nor opposition could afford to have anyone thrown out ahead of the possible crucial vote.

Earlier, Morrison had shown anything but restraint when at his news conference he described

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Bill Shorten as “a clear and present threat to Australia’s safety”. Once that would have been taken as a serious claim, which a prime minister would have been called on to justify. In these days, it’s seen as a passing comment.

In what was a highly aggressive performance, Morrison gave us another foretaste of what he’ll be like on the hustings.

In the end, by its delaying tactics in the Senate, the government prevented the amendments reaching the House before it adjourned, and so avoided a test of the numbers.

Defeat in the House would not have equalled a no confidence vote, but it would have been a serious blow for Morrison. Looking for a precedent, the House of Representatives’ clerks office went back to votes lost in 1929 (which led to an election) and on the 1941 budget (which brought down the Fadden government).

But the government may have just put off, rather than prevented, the reckoning. Phelps said on Sky, “I am sad that we didn’t get this through today ... because I believe it would have gone through on the numbers ... But you know if we have to wait until February, at least I believe that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Dodging this vote meant that legislation to give authorities better access to encrypted messages to help in the fight against terrorism looked like it would be delayed. Once the House had adjourned, any Labor amendments the Senate might pass couldn’t go back there until February.

The government had declared the encryption measure was urgent, and the blame game started in anticipation of a hold up. Then, mid-debate in the Senate, Labor abandoned its attempt to amend the bill, which glided through. In an agreement which may mean something or nothing, the government undertook to consider the ALP amendments in the new year.

Shorten didn’t want to be open to the government’s accusations of impeding legislation the security agencies said would help prevent terrorist acts. “I couldn’t go home and leave Australians over Christmas without some of the protections which we all agree are necessary,”

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he said.

The events of this week show why the government decided to have the minimum of sitting days before the election next year.

The new parliamentary session will open with a deadlock on the protection of gay students, the divestiture plan up in the air, and the Nauru-Manus vote hanging over the government.

And by that time Scott Morrison will have had his first and probably his last Christmas at Kirribilli.

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