

View from The Hill: Morrison goes a bridge too far to outsmart Shorten

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Morrison government is going over the top in trying to outsmart and smother Bill Shorten and the Labor national conference.

Leaving aside the holding of the July Super Saturday byelections when the ALP meeting was originally due, the government is attempting to outdo the rescheduled conference at every turn.

Some time ago the budget update was set for Monday, to overshadow the second day of the conference.

Read more: [Monday's MYEFO will look good, but it will set the budget up for awful trouble down the track](#)

Not content with that, Scott Morrison decided to announce Australia's new Governor-General, David Hurley, on Sunday morning at the exact same time as Shorten's opening address in Adelaide.

The prime minister rang Shorten at 7:30am to tell him about the 10 o'clock announcement.

Labor has a legitimate point in complaining about Morrison's failure to consult on the appointment. He was under no formal obligation to do so, but given that Hurley will not be sworn in until after the election, it would have been the proper course to take.

Regardless of any argument about that, the timing of the announcement was absolutely the wrong course. When Morrison was asked about it he could provide no convincing justification. It was indeed rather disrespectful to Hurley, because the obvious attempted one-upmanship would inevitably be controversial.

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Less provocative but also designed as a distraction from the attention on Labor was Sunday night's announcement for the 7pm news of a \$552.9 million increase in aged care funding, including the release of 10,000 high level home care places within weeks.

In other years, the Coalition would have wanted all attention on the Labor shindig, expecting fiery debates. But this time the government is worried about a conference which is a highly managed affair where divisions are being contained and participants have their eyes firmly on the prize of Labor winning power next year.

It is all about showcasing Shorten as fit to lead the nation.

Not that there weren't some fracas on the first day. But they came from demonstrators rather than delegates. Anti-Adani and pro-refugee protesters invaded the stage as Shorten prepared to speak, and there were noisy scenes outside the Adelaide convention centre.

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Shorten in his speech unveiled initiatives on housing affordability, the protection of superannuation and the creation of new national environmental architecture.

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His address was workmanlike - comprehensive rather than a rhetorical rallying cry. His approach at this conference is cautious and careful, designed to avoid false steps - although in policy terms Labor is bold and willing to be a big target.

The ALP's new national president Wayne Swan told the conference that "the focus now shifts to us".

In these three days Labor is committed to presenting itself as a convincing alternative government. Its message is that it's ready for office.

There are two days to go for Labor in Adelaide. But at the end of day one the government was looking desperate while the opposition was looking determined.

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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