

Looking back on the federal politics of 2018, voters can conclude they've been given a rough trot.

What's been dubbed "the permanent election campaign" to which we are subjected these days is a curse. Too often it encourages expedient rather than sound decisions and ugly behaviour dominated by noise and stunts.

Added to that, we've had from the Coalition this year an extraordinary series of leadership, policy and individual meltdowns. A government that started 2018 with a one-seat majority ends it in a minority, after the loss of a byelection and a defection to the crossbench.

This has indeed been the year of governing badly.

As the Coalition struggles towards Christmas it has been buffeted this week by a sex scandal involving an obscure Nationals MP and an attack from its own side over its energy policy.

The cavorting of Andrew Broad in "sugar baby" land has left the Nationals looking for a candidate for the Victorian seat of Mallee, safe in normal circumstances, but not to be taken for granted in these days of community independents and when the incumbent has been disgraced. (Broad will be around until the election – there is no byelection.)

Senior Nationals want a woman to run. The party's deputy leader, Senator Bridget McKenzie, is not ruling out seeking preselection but has no connection with the area. One government source says "it would be pretty late for her to be carpetbagging" into the seat. A strong local would seem better.

Whether the Liberals will make it a three-cornered contest is an open question (though they probably wouldn't field a candidate if McKenzie ran).

In 2016 the Nationals contested Murray after a Liberal retired, and won the seat; the Liberals might think they could benefit in this contest from any backlash against the Nationals over Broad's conduct. On the other hand, would they want to spend money on this seat in an election when dollars will be tight?

The Nationals have often been a steady and stabilising force within the Coalition. Coming out of this year they look like a chaotic rump, unable to manage their personal and political lives.

Barnaby Joyce destroyed his leadership with an affair and has been undermining his party as he attempts to get it back. McCormack is a trier facing a job that often looks beyond him. He'll last to the election (well, presumably) but probably not after that.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison is the ultimate trier, believing the only possible salvation for the government is constant activity. For a very short time, he looked reasonably effective. But then all the freneticism started to appear contrived and fake.

One big challenge Morrison has not been able to handle is the Coalition's "woman problem". Minimal female representation in both Coalition parties, claims of bullying in the Liberals, and the defection to the crossbench of Liberal MP Julia Banks will inevitably put off female voters. The Broad scandal feeds into the negative narrative.

Morrison himself has a "blokey" image that might turn away some female voters although Liberal sources dispute this.

It's ironic that neither Coalition party will embrace quotas but Morrison wanted a female candidate in Wentworth (only to be rebuffed by the preselectors) and now McCormack urges a woman for Mallee.

Women are thought to be useful in desperate circumstances, it seems.

Amid all the year's bedlam in conservative politics, one major policy issue remains a complete muddle - or more precisely it is the intersection of two issues, energy and climate.

The bitter battle within the Liberals over energy didn't just bring down Malcolm Turnbull – it stopped the formulation of the sort of viable policy business pleads for, to give certainty to investors.

This week the Berejiklian government called out its federal counterpart; state energy minister Don Harwin declared it “out of touch” on energy and climate policy, saying “it’s time for them to change course”. But at a testy meeting of the COAG energy council federal minister Angus Taylor was defiantly unmoved.

Also this week came criticism from the Energy Security Board, which says in its 2018 [Health of the Electricity Market](#) report that when investment is needed “it is not helpful for the Commonwealth government to be threatening powers of divestment, price setting and discretionary asset write-downs.”

Energy policy both symbolises the deep ideological divide in the Liberal party and is at the core of it. The party won't be credible on policy until it can formulate a broad position that is acceptable to stakeholders and the community. If it goes into opposition next year, doing so should be a top policy priority.

Its plan for a National Energy Guarantee was scuttled by the government itself during those crazy coup days in August. But this was not before devising the scheme had given then energy minister Josh Frydenberg a chance to show his credentials, as a policy formulator and a negotiator.

Frydenberg lost the NEG but won his colleagues' respect. He received an overwhelming vote for Liberal deputy; as things stand, he's well placed to lead his party at some future point.

Now treasurer, Frydenberg is one of the few senior Liberals who has looked half way impressive this year. His next test will be the April 2 budget, although naturally ownership of that

will lie as much or more with Morrison.

The timetable for a May election is now set. The government wants to maximise the period it has to try to regroup.

When parliament rose there was speculation the government might not want it to return in February because the Coalition faced a House defeat on a amendment to facilitate medical transfers from Manus and Nauru. This might make a March election more attractive, so the argument went.

But the government doesn't seem so concerned about that vote now, believing some of the crossbenchers will drop off the amendment or want to weaken it.

Looking to 2019: the betting is firmly on an ALP victory, in the absence of a surprising turn of events. A win by either side would at least bring an end to the revolving prime ministerships, thanks to rule changes.

Assuming Labor won a solid majority, hopefully the voters might also get a little respite before the continuous campaigning started up again.

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.

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