

Grattan on Friday: What does “reopening” Christmas Island actually mean and why do it?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Morrison government, politically-speaking, is trying to do a loaves-and-fishes exercise with the medevac legislation, over which the parliament defied the executive this week.

It is attempting to inflate Labor’s support for a modest measure to facilitate medical transfers from Manus and Nauru into a mini “Tampa” crisis.

Will this succeed? The short answer is surely “no”; the longer one is that this issue could take a deal of skin off Labor. The point is no one is yet sure how it will play out – both sides are operating on gut feelings until the polls and focus groups speak.

The Liberals think anything to do with “boats” is lethal for Labor; the ALP believe community attitudes have changed but is very apprehensive about how the debate would go if boats showed up.

No question, this is rocky for Bill Shorten. The government attack is ferocious, full of exaggeration and scaremongering.

But the Coalition’s tactics are also risky in a policy sense. Scott Morrison is running two lines. He claims that by supporting the medevac legislation Shorten has undermined offshore processing – sending a signal the borders are porous.

He goes on to say that the government, and he in particular, are ready to protect Australia against the danger of a new wave. Whatever the intelligence advisers want done will be done. The borders will stay strong.

Morrison rejects the argument that the detail of the legislation limits the incentive to people smugglers, insisting they don’t bother with “nuance”.

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Indeed. So which un-nuanced Morrison message will the smugglers hear? That the policy has been trashed – or that the borders are being fortified?

There is also the danger, which some critics have highlighted, that in its rhetoric about numerous alleged criminals on Nauru and Manus, the government could make the US more reluctant to take people (it has only accepted 456 so far – the deal was up to 1,250).

Read more: [Explainer: how will the 'medevac' bill actually affect ill asylum seekers?](#)

What the government is actually doing is hard to pin down. Take the reopening of the Christmas Island detention facility – or to be more precise “a series of compounds” there – which attracted big headlines, and attention overseas.

What does “reopening” mean? Going in with the vacuum cleaners and the mops so that the centre could function if required? Or setting up some of it immediately on a serious day-to-day operating basis?

And how convincing is the rationale for this reopening, which Morrison described as for dealing “with the prospect of transfers”?

The government says that with the closing of many detention centres, space is somewhat tight. But if people are transferred because they are sick, Christmas Island is hardly the best place for access to medical practitioners.

Maybe some people currently in detention elsewhere would be moved the Christmas Island to make room for newcomers. But wouldn't it be a lot cheaper and easier - if less dramatic and headline-grabbing - just to lease some more accommodation near currently-operating facilities?

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Anyway, while some of the transferees would be kept in detention, what’s happened previously suggests a lot could be let into the community.

It’s true that the advice from the Home Affairs department envisaged a scenario “likely necessitating the stand-up of the Christmas Island facility”, but it had the flavour of a worst-case one. (With an election and the prospect of a change of government raising questions about the future of Home Affairs secretary Mike Pezzullo, one wonders what he thinks about the department’s advice being used publicly by the government as a battering ram against Labor.)

If the government really intends to “reopen” Christmas Island in any major way, it could find itself spending a lot of money there on few if any people. If it is a faux reopening, it’s just a bit of spin that should be called out.

Read more: [*A refugee legal expert on a week of 'reckless' rhetoric and a new way to process asylum seeker claims*](#)

The medevac bill was passed despite the best efforts of the minority government to stop it, including a Senate filibuster on the final sitting day of last year, to delay the bill reaching the lower house then.

On Thursday a rather panicked government did a rerun of that December day.

This time, the Senate had passed a motion – opposed by the Coalition – calling for a royal commission “into violence, abuse and neglect of people with disability.” Labor, expecting the motion to reach the House on Thursday afternoon, prepared to push it through with crossbench support.

The government says it knew the message from the Senate hadn’t arrived as question time was

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nearing its normal end. But it was spooked by the opposition’s tactics, and fearful of what Labor might be up to. So it just kept question time running for some 150 minutes, a record.

Earlier in the day, it had to pull its legislation for applying a “big stick” to errant energy companies, because the House appeared set to amend it to prevent the government underwriting coal projects.

The government says it will take the “big stick” plan to the election. But its inability to have it bedded down before then is another failure in a long line in the energy area.

The vote on the disability motion will happen on Monday and the Coalition will not oppose it – despite its stand in the Senate. The government says it will then consider what action it should take.

Abuse of disabled people is surely as important an issue as the ill-treatment of the elderly. With the public increasingly demanding the facts and culprits be revealed where there is evidence of misconduct, a royal commission in parallel with the aged care one would have merit, in both policy and political terms.

The parliamentary week has been rugged for both sides – the government hasn’t been in control of the House but Labor hasn’t been in control of the debate, which it wanted to be all about banks not boats.

Then again, nothing could match One Nation’s tribulation, with its leader Pauline Hanson accused of sexual harassment by a bitter ex-colleague, senator Brian Burston, and her right-hand man, James Ashby, publicly scuffling with her accuser. This is a party beyond embarrassment.

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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