

Grattan on Friday: Bishop's boots were made for walking

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

As a parliament that will be unmoored winds down to the election, this fortnight has been the season for goodbyes from those departing (voluntarily).

The most dramatic was Thursday's announcement by Julie Bishop that she isn't running again.

Bishop's claim she'd reconsidered her plans on the basis she believed the government will be re-elected doesn't wash. She was always expected to bail out – it was a matter of when she'd say so.

Though anticipated, Bishop's departure is another blow for the woman-poor Liberal party – and another reminder of the costs of tearing down Malcolm Turnbull.

Read more: [***Liberals lose yet another high-profile woman, yet still no action on gender***](#)

If he had remained prime minister, the government would be going to the polls with Bishop deputy Liberal leader and foreign minister. The Liberals would still have a “woman problem”, but they'd also have a woman in their leadership team – she of those famous red shoes she dubbed her “comfortable work boot”.

Bishop still smarts over her colleagues, including those from her home state of Western Australia as well as the party's moderates, refusing to support her in the August leadership ballot, when she was humiliated with only 11 votes. The moderates argued they were operating tactically, to stymie Peter Dutton.

Would the government have been better off electorally if the Liberals had chosen Bishop over

Scott Morrison? If Morrison does badly in May, history will ask that question.

Bishop is not the street brawler Morrison is. But if she had won the leadership and gone immediately to an election, the result could have been interesting.

Read more: [Julie Bishop to quit parliament at the election](#)

Among many others leaving parliament are cabinet minister Kelly O'Dwyer, former Labor ministers Wayne Swan, Jenny Macklin and Kate Ellis, and Nationals senator John "Wacka" Williams. "Wacka" never served on the frontbench but his dogged pursuit of the financial sector's scandals gives him a legacy more substantial than many ministers leave.

In this parliament's dying days a bow is due to Speaker Tony Smith. He's not retiring but if there is a change of government, his speakership will be over.

When he was press secretary to then-treasurer Peter Costello, the joke about Smith was that he would say to media queries, "off the record, no comment". As Speaker, Smith has asserted his "voice"; he has been fair and strong. On Thursday, he gave fellow Liberal Tim Wilson a rap over the knuckles for the highly political way he has handled a parliamentary inquiry into the opposition's policy on franking credits.

It's often said of organisations that the whole is greater than the sum of the individuals. With our parliament, the contributions of some (albeit too few) individuals outshine the impression voters have of the collective.

No one is sure if the political weather changed in this fractious fortnight, which has been chaotic for both sides.

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Labor defeated the government in the House early last week over the medical transfer legislation, but since then has been trying to minimise the harm to itself.

So when the government declared sick transferees would be sent straight to Christmas Island – a plan designed to trap the opposition rather than a sensible medical policy – Bill Shorten just agreed. He wasn't going to let more political capital seep away.

Labor knows it has taken a hit among some voters with its support for the legislation, though this could be partly mitigated by the issue involving the role of doctors, respected in the community.

The Coalition grabbed the controversy as a life raft, but then found itself blown somewhat off course by the Helloworld affair.

That cluster bomb has managed to strike both a current and a former minister. It started with a story about Finance Minister Mathias Cormann booking flights for a Singapore holiday through a mate, Helloworld CEO and Liberal party treasurer Andrew Burnes, and the company failing to process his credit card for payment.

Read more: [***View from The Hill: Minister who watches the nation's credit card overlooks his own***](#)

It then spread to disclosures about Helloworld subsidiary QBT getting speedy access to the Australian embassy in Washington, allegedly courtesy of the close friendship Burnes has with ambassador and former treasurer Joe Hockey (a big shareholder in Helloworld.)

Hockey was frustrated that his travel arrangements were being handled unprofessionally, which provided a potential opening for QBT.

Whistleblower Russell Carstensen, formerly group general manager of QBT, wrote in a Thursday letter to a Senate estimates committee that in April 2017, when Carstensen was in Europe, Burnes had contacted him to say “he had arranged a meeting with Mr Hockey and I had to fly home via Washington to meet with him”, which he did.

According to Carstensen, when he asked Burnes how the appointment with the ambassador could be arranged so quickly, Burnes replied “Hockey owes me”.

Burnes late Thursday said he hadn’t organised any meeting, adding “I emphatically deny ever having told Mr Carstensen that Mr Hockey ‘owes me’ or any words to that effect”.

Wherever the story goes from here, the public’s take will be simply one of mates doing favours for mates, adding to people’s cynicism about politicians generally and the government in particular.

The mates affair is unlikely to have the same direct impact as the medical transfer controversy. The strength of that issue, however, will be determined by whether any boats appear. If there are none, Labor could dodge a bullet because the government’s rhetoric will start to sound hollow.

While this fortnight has had that “end of term” feel, of course there is the big test to go before the parliament finishes.

Just as in 2016, a budget will be used as an election launching pad. It’s a gamble for the Coalition. Last time - when the Turnbull government built the budget around company tax cuts - it didn’t end so well.

The Morrison government has to shape an April 2 budget that shores up its economic credentials as well as offering some voter bait - a budget that’s reasonably received on the night and can underpin a campaign.

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Bill Shorten must produce a parliamentary reply two days later that mixes demolition with some positive initiatives.

No pressure anyone.

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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