

## Grattan on Friday: The Coalition is trapped in its coal minefield

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

Sydney shock jock Ray Hadley was apoplectic. Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, one of Hadley's favourites, who has a regular spot on his 2GB program, had just committed blasphemy.

Dutton said he didn't believe in the government building a new coal-fired power station. Hadley couldn't credit what he was hearing. "You're toeing the [Morrison] company line", he said accusingly.

It's another story with Dutton's cabinet colleague and fellow Queenslander, Resources Minister Matt Canavan, who is part of the Queensland Nationals' push for support for a new power station in that state.

"Studies have come back always saying that a HELE [high-efficiency, low-emissions] or a new coal-fired power station would make a lot of sense in North Queensland," Canavan said this week.

The two ministers' divergent views are not surprising on the basis of where they come from. In Brisbane voters tend to share similar opinions on climate change and coal to those in the southern capitals – it's the regions where support for coal is stronger.

What's surprising is how the rifts at the government's highest levels are being exposed. In these desperate days, it is every minister, every government backbencher, and each part, or sub-part, of the Coalition for themselves.

Never mind cabinet solidarity, or Coalition unity.

The most spectacular outbreak came this week from Barnaby Joyce, declaring himself the "elected deputy prime minister" and pressing the government for a strongly pro-coal stand.

## Grattan on Friday: The Coalition is trapped in its coal minefield

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

It was a slap at besieged Nationals leader Michael McCormack, after rumourmongering that McCormack might be replaced even before the election. Predictably, the NSW Nationals, fighting a difficult state election, were furious.

The Joyce outbreak was further evidence that the federal Nationals are a mess, over leadership and electorally. They have a party room of 22 - there are fears they could lose up to four House of Representatives seats as well as going down two in the Senate.

---

**Read more:** [\*View from The Hill: Coal turns lumpy for Scott Morrison and the Nationals\*](#)

---

(However it's not all gloom in the Nationals – at the election they will gain three new women, two in the Senate – Susan McDonald from Queensland and Sam McMahon from the Northern Territory - and Anne Webster in the Victorian seat of Mallee. Whatever happens to the party's numbers overall, the women will go from two to four or five, depending on the fate of Michelle Landry, who holds the marginal seat of Capricornia. The Nationals' NSW Senate candidate is also a woman but is unlikely to be elected.)

By mid week Joyce was back in his box, stressing that McCormack would take the party to the election. But he was still in the coal advocacy vanguard.

The coal debate and the assertiveness of the Queensland Nationals smoked out a clutch of Liberal moderates, who question spending government money on coal projects (although there is some confusion between building power stations and underwriting ventures).

---

**Read more:** [\*Queensland Nationals Barry O'Sullivan challenges Morrison over coal\*](#)

---

## Grattan on Friday: The Coalition is trapped in its coal minefield

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

The government's policy is for underwriting "firm power" projects, on a technology-neutral basis, if they stack up commercially.

The marauding Nationals were derisive of moderate Liberals trying to protect their seats. "Trendy inner-city Liberals who want to oppose coal and the jobs it creates should consider joining the Greens," Queensland National George Christensen said tartly on Facebook.

It was a rare appearance by the moderates, who have made a poor showing over the last few years. True, some were crucial in achieving the same-sex marriage reform. But in general they've failed to push back against the right's tightening ideological grip on the Liberal party, and the government has suffered as a result.

The week highlighted, yet again, that instead of a credible energy policy, the government has only confusion and black holes.

With his recent announcements, Morrison has been trying to show he's heard the electorate on climate change. But actually, these were mostly extensions of what had been done or proposed.

The Abbott government's emissions reduction fund (renamed) is getting an injection, given it would soon be close to exhausted. And the Snowy pumped hydro scheme, announced by Malcolm Turnbull, has received the go-ahead. Didn't we expect that? There was also modest support for a new inter-connector to transmit Tasmanian hydro power to Victoria.

The government can't get its "big stick" legislation - aimed at recalcitrant power companies - through parliament. It will take it to the election. But who knows what its future would be in the unlikely event of a re-elected Coalition government? It would face Senate hurdles and anyway "free market" Liberals don't like it.

And then we come to the underwriting initiative. The government has 66 submissions seeking support, 10 of which have "identified coal as a source of generation".

## Grattan on Friday: The Coalition is trapped in its coal minefield

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

Sources say it is hoped to announce backing for some projects before the election. But this will be fraught, internally and externally, for the government.

One source hinted one project might involve coal. Even if this is true, it won't satisfy the Coalition's coal spruikers, deeply unhappy that Morrison has flagged there won't be support for a Queensland coal-fired power station. (The Queenslanders liken Morrison's cooling on coal to Kevin Rudd's 2010 back off from his emissions trading scheme.)

On the other hand, underwriting of any coal project would alarm Liberals in the so-called "leafy-suburbs" electorates.

Given the proximity to the election, the government could do little more than give promises to particular projects. There is also the risk of blow back from those whose bids are unsuccessful.

There would be no obligation on a Labor government to honour any commitments, because formal agreements would not have been finalised.

Meanwhile the government is trying to promote a scare against Labor's climate policy, still to be fully outlined, which includes reducing emissions by an ambitious 45% by 2030 (compared with the government's pledge of 26-28%).

But unlike, for example, the scare over the ALP's franking credits policy (dubbed by the government a "retirement tax"), this scare is much harder to run, except in specific regional areas.

The zeitgeist is in Labor's favour on the climate issue, not least after sweltering summer days and bushfires.

The public have a great deal of faith in renewables - in focus groups people don't just like them, they romanticise them.

## Grattan on Friday: The Coalition is trapped in its coal minefield

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

---

It seems the government can't take a trick on climate and energy policy - even the school children are reminding it of that.

---

**Read more:** [Students striking for climate action are showing the exact skills employers look for](#)

---

*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.*

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-the-coalition-is-trapped-in-its-coal-minefield-113577>