

Scott Morrison's ruling that the Liberals should put One Nation below Labor on their how-to-vote cards is less a stand on principle than a political gesture and a compromise.

A gesture that came because the Prime Minister recognised he must stiffen his spine publicly against One Nation, especially to stem further leaching of the Liberals' crumbling support in Victoria.

A compromise, because the Liberals are not going all the way to placing One Nation last.

Notably, they are allowing for the Greens to be put under One Nation on Liberal tickets. For those on the right of the party - such as [Tony Abbott](#) - the Greens are far more unpalatable than One Nation.

Morrison was pushed by circumstances to make his Thursday announcement.

The New Zealand mosques massacre brought the issue of preferences into focus. Morrison parried, saying it was a matter for later, when candidates were known, and for the party organisation.

But with this week's revelations about the extraordinary visit to the US gun lobby by James Ashby, Pauline Hanson's chief of staff, and Steve Dickson, One Nation's Senate candidate, Morrison's shilly-shallying became untenable.

Morrison attributed his change of position to those revelations, saying he'd been waiting to see the reaction of One Nation's leadership, and it had been "unsatisfactory".

When Hanson appeared a few hours later, it was to claim victim status for One Nation - a pitch that might play quite well with some of her supporters, who see themselves as victims of one

kind or another.

“If it wasn’t for Roger Muller and the Islamist Al Jazeera network, One Nation would never, never have had any association with the NRA [National Rifle Association],” she said. She stood by Ashby and Dickson, though Dickson got a mild rebuke for some of his (truly appalling) comments. Steve had been “stitched up”; he was “a victim of entrapment”.

In short, Hanson gave no ground.

She dismissed Morrison as “a fool” who had handed the Lodge keys to Bill Shorten by his preference decision.

In explaining his stand, Morrison harked back to John Howard. “I haven’t rushed into this decision, in the same way that John Howard, who I have been consulting with closely on this matter ... did not rush into this decision when he took it 20 years ago. I have followed a similar considered process,” he said.

Did he miss the irony? Indeed, it was the same process (though Morrison didn’t take as long and hasn’t gone as far as Howard did). Far from leading from the front, both Howard and Morrison were pushed from behind. And now, as with Howard in the 1990s, Victorian Liberals, who are fearing a bloodbath in May, have been doing much of the shoving.

But Victoria is only part of the election story, and the Liberals are only one partner in the Coalition, albeit the major one.

Nationals leader Michael McCormack quickly declared his party’s decisions would be made “at a state and local level”.

McCormack said he personally always put the Greens last - “they represent a greater danger to regional areas than do any other party”. As for whether One Nation should be above or below

Labor, he didn't care - "voters have the choice".

McCormack's position is in sharp contrast to that of one of his predecessors. Tim Fischer, asked this week if One Nation should be put at the bottom, said: "My preference? I'd put them last".

In Queensland the Liberals and Nationals are organisationally merged into the Liberal National Party (LNP). But they sit in different party rooms in Canberra and on preferences they'll separate into their respective tribes.

The Queensland Nationals, facing a substantial One Nation vote in key seats, will do what they judge will maximise their chances, meaning a number can be expected to play ball with Hanson.

In lower house electorates Coalition preferences don't matter to One Nation, which is not in the running for a seat. But how One Nation preferences flow is important to some Coalition MPs. One Nation voters are ill-disciplined with their preferences, but in a tight contest a few votes can make the difference.

Leaving aside the fact they'd share certain One Nation policy views, vulnerable Queensland Nationals would be anxious to avoid anything that invites preference retaliation.

Whether Hanson spurns these needy Nationals remains to be seen. After Morrison's statement Mark Latham, just elected for One Nation to the NSW parliament, was quick to threaten retaliation in Liberal and Nationals seats in that state.

It wasn't just on preferences that Morrison grappled with the north-south divide this week.

When the government produced its announcement on underwriting "firm power" projects, it was against the background of a concerted pro-coal campaign from Queensland Nationals, supported by Barnaby Joyce (a former Queensland senator, who now holds a NSW seat).

But the commercial arguments can't be ignored and there was just one coal project among the dozen ventures chosen – and that was an upgrade for an existing operation in NSW.

Beyond the short list, however, the government announced a feasibility study for a new coal-fired power station in Queensland. To be precise, the study would evaluate projects in north and central Queensland that “include but are not limited to a new HELE coal project in Collinsville, upgrades of existing generators as well as gas and hydro projects”.

This was both gesture and compromise.

The chances of such a study leading to a coal-fired power station would be very small, given the investment realities. But politically, it is the fact of the study that counts.

Faced with the Coalition's coal lobby, for Morrison a feasibility study was an ideal fix. It appears to be doing something. It is relatively cheap. It can be trumpeted by the supporters of coal (as Joyce did). It doesn't stir up the anti-coal voters in the south too much. And it delays for a long time a real decision.

The announcement of the study seems to have muted the noise from the Nationals on the coal question.

Its another story with the argument over preferences, not least because it splits Liberal ranks.

Morrison would hope he's done enough to satisfy supporters in those key Victorian seats.

But Malcolm Turnbull quickly set the bar higher, when he [told](#) the Australian Financial Review, “The call to show the most emphatic disapproval of One Nation is absolutely justified. And they should be put last. Scott Morrison has obviously gone some way towards that today, but hopefully he will go further.”

Grattan on Friday: Scott Morrison struggles to straddle the south-north divide

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And Victorian voters do have an ear for what the former prime minister says.

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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