

What will the Turnbull-Morrison government be remembered for?

Written by Rob Manwaring, Senior Lecturer, Politics and Public Policy, Flinders University

This article is part of a series examining the Coalition government's record on key issues while in power and what Labor is promising if it wins the 2019 federal election.

When the “mighty Roman” Gough Whitlam died, Indigenous leader Noel Pearson delivered a memorable eulogy. Channelling Monty Python, Pearson [asked](#) what had Whitlam ever done for Australia? Pearson then reeled off a long list of achievements, including Medibank, no-fault divorce, needs-based schools funding, the Racial Discrimination Act and many more. This was a blistering set of reforms by a truly radical and activist government.

After close to four years of the Turnbull and Morrison Coalition government, we might well ask: “What has the Coalition done for us?”

It is hard to think of a single notable achievement for which the government will be credited or remembered. If we take another government as ideologically driven as Whitlam’s – albeit from a different vantage point – in this case John Howard’s, we can still recall a significant range of policies and changes. Chief among these was gun control.

In contrast, we are hardly likely to remember the Turnbull-Morrison governments.

Read more: [Grattan on Friday: Scott Morrison struggles to straddle the south-north divide](#)

In 2016, if we vaguely recall, there was a [double-dissolution election](#) – but could many voters even remember why? Ah, the trigger was the ill-fated [Australian Building and Construction Commission](#), which did not even feature during the election campaign.

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Since then, what have been the major policy achievements?

The [National Energy Guarantee](#) ? If the government is likely to be remembered at all, it will be for the deep-seated divisions that meant Malcolm Turnbull was entirely unable to deliver a clear and coherent energy and climate policy. This was, after all, a government that chose to ignore Chief Scientist Alan Finkel's call for a Clean Energy Target.

Tony Abbott's [reversal](#) on withdrawing from the [Paris Climate Agreement](#) (under Turnbull), but then arguing Australia should stay in (especially with Angus Taylor's [masterful handling](#) of the data on emissions) reflected a policy agenda dogged by internal divisions and incoherence.

Scott Morrison's major contribution to the debate was to bring a piece of [coal](#) into the parliament.

Read more: [***What kind of prime minister will Scott Morrison be?***](#)

Perhaps immigration? Turnbull was forced to rescue a deal initially brokered with the Obama administration, after new President Donald Trump mocked the deal as ["stupid"](#). With the government wedded to a "tough" border policy, including re-opening the detention facility on Christmas Island, it even [lost the vote](#) on "medevac" legislation to ensure medical treatment for suffering refugees.

Any lasting achievements that seem to have happened were only because the government was either forced to, or reluctantly accepted it needed to, make changes. On the banking royal commission, Morrison – a political leader resolutely wedded to remain on the wrong side of history – had initially described it as a "[populist whinge](#)". Any systemic changes to the banking sector will emerge, in spite of, rather than because of the government's actions.

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Turnbull [will point](#) to legislating for same-sex marriage as one of his government's signature policy achievements, following the plebiscite. Yet Morrison will hardly be trumpeting this achievement, given that [he voted against it](#).

Yes, same-sex marriage should be a lasting and welcome change, but again, the Coalition did much to resist it.

In stark contrast, German Chancellor Angela Merkel enabled a parliamentary vote but then [voted against it](#) – a more principled position than the unnecessary plebiscite. This was a government that consistently showed it was behind public opinion on a range of issues.

There is a case that underneath the general political and policy mess of the Turnbull-Morrison era, the government notched up some quiet achievements. These include a free-trade deal with Indonesia, entering the fourth phase of the bipartisan [national plan](#) to reduce family violence, and [trying](#) to embed the Gonski 2.0 schools funding.

Many public servants across a range of portfolios were busily, professionally carrying out a range of important policies and programs out of the media glare. This reflects a long-standing view of government as policy incrementalism – carrying out the everyday, important, but unglamorous work of running the country.

Perhaps the greatest missed opportunity of the Turnbull-Morrison era has been a consistent failure to adequately represent the concerns and issues of the centre-right of Australian politics. Neither Turnbull or Morrison understood the promise of [Burkean conservatism](#) or even John Stuart Mill's liberalism.

Worse still, in the case of the Nationals, there was an almost wilful inability to offer a coherent and reasoned case on behalf of regional Australia. As Coalition MPs scratch their heads and wonder where it all went so horribly wrong, they might well look at South Australia and now New South Wales to remind themselves what a "liberal" government looks like.

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Indeed, if we needed a lasting image of the Nationals' mishandling of the water portfolio, then the [dead fish of the Menindee](#) will suffice.

As Scott Morrison most likely exits the prime ministership, a different [kind of Roman](#) to Whitlam, his only comfort might be that he is not Theresa May.

Rob Manwaring 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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