

## View from The Hill: Third debate contained some messages about and from the leaders

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Two moments stood out in Wednesday night's debate, which substantially canvassed issues that have been chewed over endlessly through the campaign.

These moments were significant not for the impact they'll have on voters - who are probably over debates, if not the whole election - but for what they revealed about the leaders.

The first was Bill Shorten appearing genuinely torn over the issue of Israel Folau, found guilty of breaching Rugby Australia rules for saying homosexuals would go to hell unless they repented.

Shorten, speaking on the question about religious freedom, said Folau was "entitled to his views. And he shouldn't suffer an employment penalty for it."

But there was the other side – the hurtful impact of a public figure putting out such views on social media. "I don't think it's a clear-cut issue when the edges bump up against each other," he said.

So often, especially in campaigns, leaders talk in black and white, failing to acknowledge nuances. Freedom of speech, especially when it involves religion, is an issue full of nuance, because of the conflicting values in play. Sometimes there is no right answer.

The second, very different, notable moment was Scott Morrison declaring Melissa Price would be environment minister if he were re-elected.

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Shorten continued to hold out on nominating who'd be his home affairs minister, saying this is a matter for after the election. But when Morrison was asked "will you keep the same environment minister?" he immediately said "yes" (prompting Shorten to quip about the invisible minister, "where is she?").

Morrison's answer might seem at first blush to be a small point. But it highlights how he says and does things for immediate needs or advantage, rather than worrying about the longer term.

He may not, if the polls are right, be forming a new ministry later this month. But if he is, Price should not be in his cabinet, and he knows it. In the debate, he should have avoided a commitment.

But it was the same recently, when he promised that Linda Reynolds, whom he was promoting to the defence industry job – a perfectly sensible appointment – would get the defence portfolio in a re-elected government.

He did not have to give that undertaking, and should have kept his options open.

For the most part, Wednesday's head-to-head saw both leaders minimising risks; neither delivered any knockout blows.

There was no "space invader" behaviour, or gotcha moment. The day had already been dominated by Shorten's angry and emotional reply to the Daily Telegraph's now notorious "Mother of Invention" story that took issue with his Monday anecdote about his mother.

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The debate format, with National Press Club president Sabra Lane the sole interrogator, rather than a panel or audience members, allowed each leader to put a couple of questions to the other.

Morrison's were on Labor's superannuation and negative gearing policies; Shorten's were on Labor policies too, as he challenged Morrison over cancer funding and child care.

Shorten would not give the cost of a superannuation measure that Morrison sought but said Labor's full costings will be released on Friday.

When Lane asked the leaders about hard but unpopular decisions they'd made, it wasn't surprising that Morrison went to border protection.

But it was interesting that, after referencing having to tell people in his union days they couldn't get all they wanted, Shorten nominated persuading his party to accept turnbacks. "I felt that the experience of defeating the people smugglers proved that Labor needed to change," he said. It was an I-run-things message, to the public and, perhaps for the future, to his party.

Morrison also sent a message, when asked how he would ensure his party's conservative wing didn't continue the era of disruption.

"I will lead, as I always have, from the middle," he said. His history had been to work "right across the spectrum of our party. And so I've said to my party, 'This is the direction I'm heading in and I'm asking you to join me,' and they have," he said.

As they headed out of this final debate the leaders were hit with a last question. Would they agree to an independent debates commission to avoid the haggling over these occasions in future?

They both agreed immediately. No mileage in hedging just then. Let's hope that is an

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undertaking that lasts.

*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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