

The Morrison government appears to be seething with anger at big business. At least, that's the impression you get from a lecturing, hectoring speech delivered this week by Ben Morton, who's assistant minister to the prime minister.

What is the beef? In a nutshell, that some big businesses have taken up "activist" issues, and that the corporates aren't doing sufficient heavy lifting in selling (government) policies. Also, that big business is not relating enough to the "quiet Australians".

Smaller businesses – seen as closer to and better communicators with these "quiet Australians" - are viewed more kindly.

The speech came with the full prime ministerial imprimatur. Morton, one of Morrison's inner circle, discussed it with the PM, who backed him in comments to The Australian.

What was particularly surprising was Morton's tone – upbraiding, with more than a touch of arrogance.

Some extracts make the point.

ON supporting activist issues: "Business should not be seduced by the noisy elites, who try to bend business to their narrow viewpoints. Yet too often I see corporate Australia succumb or pander to similar pressures from noisy, highly orchestrated campaigns of elites typified by groups such as GetUp or activist shareholders."

He instanced "engineering firm, Aurecon, which recently succumbed to activist pressure and cuts ties with Adani in line with its professed 'sustainability commitments'. Whatever Aurecon's successes on other fronts, expect to be called out by a government representing quiet Australians".

ON the failure to be active enough in selling the policy agenda, he said: "With a few notable exceptions, in recent years corporate Australia has become increasingly silent (in their communications to their employees and the wider community) on those issues which will grow our economy, make Australia more productive and create more employment.

"Too often big businesses have been in the frontline on social issues, but missing in action when arguing for policies which would grow jobs and the economy."

Then there was the blunt order: "Instruct your public affairs units. Instead of pretending you love paying tax or that you're building electric cars rather than mining coal, or are in the solar panel rather than the oil or gas business, tell your employees and the quiet Australians in their communities what you can do for them."

And this extraordinary statement: "I must admit to not speaking in parliament during the debate on reducing the company tax rate. While I obviously agree with reducing corporate tax, I felt that – with one or two notable exceptions - if corporate Australia wasn't prepared to make the case for tax cuts, why should I?"

Business should pitch every idea or "demand" to government in terms of what was good for the "quiet Australians", Morton said.

Of course, big business should think in terms of ordinary Australians – who are its customers. We only have to remember the banking royal commission to recall appalling lapses and the public's disgust at them.

But Morton's harangue against corporates for being too active on some fronts and not active enough on others says more about the government than about business.

While in some cases they are influenced by the views of executives or staff, large companies these days are inclined to take up social and environmental issues because they're responding to what they see as community views - judged to be held much more widely than just by the so-called "elites". (By the way, let's not fall for any spin that the government isn't part of the

elite.)

Messages about sustainability, for example, reflect companies' perceptions that climate change has become a huge issue that affects the way investors and consumers behave.

Companies that took a stand on same-sex marriage often saw themselves as aligning with community attitudes.

Big businesses have become more sensitive to their "social licence". The upgrading of the importance of "social licence" reflects changing views in the society.

Activism is one of the drivers of attitudinal shifts, but not the only one. Whatever the forces at work, companies can't afford to ignore prevailing sentiments when consumers may judge them, at least in part, on their broader stands.

As for Morton's claim about businesses not promoting policies, this ignores some key points.

He underestimates the extent to which businesses have spruiked the need for reforms, including on tax.

Also, many big businesses these days do not want to be overtly political, especially international companies. They've become reluctant, for example, to give political donations.

Finally, while as Morton says "the Liberal Party is not the political wing of big business", big business is not – and should not be - the corporate wing of the Liberal party. Maybe it saw itself like that once, but not now. Basically, it is up to the government and the Coalition parties to do their own selling.

View from The Hill: Morrison's right hand man dispenses with niceties in lecturing big business

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Business is getting used to lectures from an antsy government. Recently Treasurer Josh Frydenberg gave it a gee-up, saying “My message today for business is to back yourself and use your balance sheet to invest and grow”.

There was a big difference, however, between the Morton and Frydenberg speeches. Frydenberg stuck to core issues and avoided being gratuitous.

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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