

Scott Morrison's government is heading to the end of 2019 amid a debate about its economic judgement and with a number of substantial policy moves started but not completed.

Morrison this week delivered to an audience from big business what was described as his most important speech for the rest of the year. He wanted the voters to know the government is not – underscore NOT – panicking about the economy.

Even so, it is putting in a little extra stimulus by fast tracking some infrastructure.

Whether the government should be panicking is the question - we'll be able to better answer that when the September quarter national accounts are released next month.

Morrison points out that since the election the Coalition has injected an additional \$9.5 billion for 2019-20 and 2021-22 - through tax relief, the infrastructure bring-forwards and extra funding, and drought assistance to communities.

[This week's modest infrastructure initiative](#) will amount to little in itself in terms of economic activity - it is a holding message as the government waits to see whether it will have to do more in the near term while firming up plans for its preferred timetable of some action in the budget.

Next week begins the year's final parliamentary fortnight, with the main attention on the fate of two bills.

The ensuring integrity legislation, to crack down on bad behaviour in the union movement, seemed set to pass the Senate last week. After amendments had been promised to Centre Alliance, the government needed just one extra vote out of the combined three votes of One Nation and Jacqui Lambie.

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Lambie had earlier declared she'd support the legislation if maverick construction union official John Setka didn't quit his post (which he has no intention of doing).

Then Lambie balked, worried about the danger of some unions being caught on technical breaches. Pauline Hanson's attention, meanwhile, was on other things. Hanson has now engaged with amendments; the government has done more tweaking; the legislation again seems set to pass.

The other bill in the spotlight would repeal medevac. The government's determination on this is driven by its desire to look tough (and reverse the humiliation the passage of medevac inflicted on it) rather than by need. Medevac applies only to the dwindling number of people still in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, not to any future arrivals; the people smuggling trade hasn't restarted.

Lambie is the swing vote on the repeal bill and, for reasons unclear, she has been refusing to disclose her position. The bill is on the Senate notice paper for Wednesday.

Beyond immediate legislation, and despite the conventional commentary about it lacking an "agenda", the government in fact has set itself quite a lot of work.

Much of it falls under Christian Porter, who as attorney-general and industrial relations minister is one of the busiest people in the Morrison ministry.

The issues he's dealing with bring fierce battles. As he lamented at the National Press Club on Wednesday: "Every new task I am allotted does seem to inevitably support the observation that rights in practice collide with each other rather than neatly contouring into each other."

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Religious freedom is an obvious case, as he's found in consultations with more than 90 different stakeholders. He announced this week the draft bill will be changed so religious groups running hospitals and aged care facilities would be able to discriminate in favour of employing people on faith grounds, in the same way religious schools can.

Originally it had been hoped the legislation would be done and dusted this year, but this proved impossible. Indeed its eventual fate remains in question; the government will engage with Labor to try for a unity ticket.

Also in Porter's bailiwick is press freedom, which became a hot issue after the raids on the ABC and a News Corp journalist.

A report on some aspects by the parliamentary joint committee on intelligence on security has been delayed until near Christmas. Chairman Andrew Hastie explained the committee is "endeavouring to achieve a bipartisan report, which delivers tangible areas for reform and consideration".

One crucial area is whistle blower protection. Porter said the government would soon respond to an earlier review of this to ensure "the act is easily and readily understandable to the people who need to use it".

How much ground the government is willing to give on media freedom is yet to be seen. It would prefer to yield as little as possible; its default position is secrecy. Porter is open to some reforms, including on problems in the freedom of information system and on whistle blowers, but it's a matter of their degree.

Also still to come is legislation for an integrity commission. This was a reluctant pre-election

commitment, essentially forced by the politics.

The body would be heavily circumscribed; as Porter reaffirmed this week, it wouldn't be able to make "corrupt conduct findings" against politicians or public servants. Rather, in such cases it would investigate and send evidence to the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions.

Porter is also following up Morrison's concern – which has sparked a sharp reaction - about resource companies being targeted by environmental activists.

As well as all this, Porter is running the government's industrial relations reform process, which is taking a softly-softly-catchee-monkey approach, gradually moving through specified issues.

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This week Morrison flagged another priority area – reducing the "administrative clutter" around awards as well as in other parts of the system.

"While the number of awards has reduced, it appears that they have not become simpler – indeed many believe that they have become more complex," he told his business audience, again exhorting them to make the case for reform (meaning, not to leave the jawboning to him and his colleagues).

In his speech, Morrison gave the government's plans to deregulate procedures for the approval of major projects a push along, saying environmental approval processes were "overly complex, duplicative and they take too long".

Simplifying them seems a no brainer. The issue will always be, however, whether that goes further and cuts into proper scrutiny and environmental protections.

Among the initiatives the government has put on its plate since the election is the pursuit of indigenous recognition in the constitution.

Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt again asserted this week: “I am committed to delivering constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians in this term of parliament.” It is a desirable but very ambitious aspiration that will be extremely hard, if not impossible, to land.

In sum, the government will finish 2019 with a cluster of loose ends. The challenges ahead in managing the politics of trying to tie them up should not be under-estimated.

*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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