

Morrison's 42 frontbenchers must not derail Coalition



Big crowd: Prime Minister Scott Morrison with his cabinet ministers. Picture: Gary Ramage

[Chris Kenny](#), Associate Editor, 12:00AM September 1, 2018

Thanks to Deep Thought, that mythical computer created by Douglas Adams, we know the answer to life, the universe and everything is 42. Which is something Scott Morrison must have taken to heart because that is the size of his frontbench. You could run a galaxy with a crew that big.

In The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy it took Deep Thought 7.5 million years to come up with the magic number, but it may take even longer to work out what all our ministers are supposed to do. To be fair, the Prime Minister inherited the number of slots, which, like government spending, only ever goes in one direction.

As a satirist, Adams would have been proud to claim some of the titles. We have a Minister for Digital Transformation — sounds like a mystical manicurist — and, although there is no minister for development, there is an Assistant Minister for Regional Development and another for international development. Even though we have a Health Minister and an Indigenous Affairs Minister we also, apparently, need an Indigenous Health Minister. While there is a Minister for Families, there is also an Assistant Minister for Children and Families, and the Transport Minister has an Assistant Minister for Roads and Transport.

And so it goes. Soon they will need a minister for ministerial arrangements — oops, they do, the Special Minister of State. The organisational chart of roles, responsibilities and key performance indicators must resemble something by Jackson Pollock.

The Coalition has 107 people in parliament and more than a third of them are part of the executive. Yet this wasn't enough to keep everyone happy, so Morrison added the novel twist of special envoys. Now former prime minister Tony Abbott and former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce have titles, if not real jobs. Perhaps Morrison thought it would be impossible for Joyce, as minister, to match David Littleproud's efforts, and figured Abbott didn't have the experience or cut-through of Nigel Scullion. No, seriously.

Instead, Abbott and Joyce will tackle the same dilemmas as the responsible federal ministers and their eight state and territory counterparts. If nine ministers and a special envoy can't resolve indigenous disadvantage or end the drought, perhaps someone may have to concede that big government doesn't hold all the answers.

The federal executive has become so expansive that when frontbenchers resigned lately in fits of pique, it was the first time most people had heard of them.

Anyone who puts their hand up for the brutal business of politics has my admiration, but you might aspire to be known for something constructive before seeking attention for resigning in protest.

As the 42 frontbenchers, two special envoys, Speaker, Senate President and Deputy President, Deputy Speaker, whips, committee chairs and party officials gather to discuss how the government has gone so badly awry that it has equalled the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era for leadership switches while besting it by 33.33 per cent on the number of prime ministers in two terms, they may overlook the herd of elephants in the room. With 50 or so Comcars idling outside, they may want to consider that there may be too many people trying to do too many things, so that none of them gets very much done at all.

Governments need to communicate clearly with voters on their priorities, not have 42 people stumbling around pushing niche initiatives or tripping over and creating distractions. The best start Morrison could have made when naming his ministry would have been to shrink it. Fewer ministers, leaner government,

lower costs and prioritising core tasks: it would have been perfect. But it was never an option because each frontbench place helps construct the domino puzzle of party unity. With the partyroom as calm as a rumpus room on a rainy day, now was not the time to take away the toys.

What the Prime Minister must do, however, is disregard the white noise and concentrate all the government's efforts on a handful of tasks. He needs to get a few important issues right and make sure he is recognised for core achievements and values. For a variety of reasons, Malcolm Turnbull never succeeded at this; there was a lack of clarity and differentiation around some policies, failure to cut through in communications and growing levels of dissent.

The closest Turnbull came to an authentic economic narrative was when he delivered income tax cuts to match the company tax plans. Suddenly there was a low-tax/pro-growth mantra that benefited all taxpayers and contrasted sharply with Labor's high-tax agenda. Yet by the time of July's by-elections the Coalition had stopped talking about it.

Morrison needs to fire up on that theme; it will shift votes despite the company tax cuts being seriously curtailed. Border protection is the other achievement to be banked; Labor's record is appalling and voters need to be reminded the ALP promised to turn boats back in 2007 before demonstrating a tragic lack of resolve.

A trifecta of other dilemmas that will decide the fortunes of the government should not really be federal responsibilities; unmentioned in section 51 of the Constitution, energy, education and health should be the domain of the states. They are vast areas of spending, demand, complication and grievance that Canberra has taken on board without properly considering the burden or asking voters if this rebalancing of the federation was warranted.

Medicare ensures all taxpayers directly contribute to health costs and that all medical consumers deal with a federal agency. But hospitals were left to the states until Kevin Rudd ensured Canberra had a direct role. Likewise schools, aside from the private system, were a state responsibility until Julia Gillard gave the federal government a direct hand in funding arrangements for every school.

And the states controlled their energy requirements until Paul Keating created the National Electricity Market to increase competition and efficiency. In the past decade climate policies have thrown a Canberra spanner into every state's energy works.

As a result of this creeping centralism, Canberra has a much larger draw on its funding, duplicates state bureaucracies, and owns the complaints and inflated expectations of taxpayers. Federal politicians are swamped by voters' frustrations relating to schools, hospitals and power prices — grievances that, until a decade ago, belonged to their state colleagues.

Education Minister Dan Tehan must do a deal with the Catholic education system as soon as possible — the Coalition should have satisfied the Catholic sector first, not last. In health, Greg Hunt needs to batten down the hatches and be ready to counter the mother of all scare campaigns.

Energy is the pivotal issue. Turnbull's desire for emissions reductions, Paris compliance and bipartisanship triggered his demise. Morrison has done well in splitting the portfolio from environment and installing Angus Taylor. Now the lignite hits the road.

Price and reliability must trump all else, and the clearest way to send that signal would be to withdraw from Paris. But for reasons of diplomatic consistency and trade positioning the Coalition seems loath to do that. It will need not only to articulate how the Paris targets will not drive policy — as Taylor has started to do — but also to demonstrate this reality. Whether it acts to extend the life of the Liddell coal-fired power station in NSW's Hunter Valley or underwrites new investment in dispatchable generation, it must get something done before the election. It needs a fierce battle with Labor: lower prices versus lower emissions.

Bill Shorten is trying to suggest his policy objectives focus on price and reliability, too; the lie in running this rhetoric while spruiking a 50 per cent renewable energy target and 45 per cent emissions reduction scheme must be exposed. This is the most prospective issue for the Coalition. It is the reason it put itself through the trauma of another leadership change and it must make the most of it.

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