

Style is OK up to a point but it's substance that carries the vote



Scott Morrison at Endeavour Sports High's Endeavour Clontarf Academy, which is a mentoring program for Aboriginal boys. Picture: David Swift.

Chris Kenny, Associate Editor, 12:00AM September 8, 2018

ScoMo sports a rugby league jersey, passes a footy, gives a double thumbs-up to the camera, enthuses about the Cronulla Sharks, calls Karl Stefanovic mate, just like Macca, drops in to the bush in a baseball cap, yucks it up on 2GB and, in case you missed it, tells us again that he's a "massive" Sharks fan. Toto, we are not in Point Piper any more.

The change in style is everything to Scott Morrison. And this looms as a strategic mistake because he needs to reshape the substance as well.

Morrison is proudly daggy and ordinary, complete with a mortgage and friendly neighbours. Yet politically he is unique — he does not have blood on his hands. (Since Gough Whitlam, every prime minister has had to win their party's leadership by tearing someone down, with the complicated exception of John Howard who first ended up leader after Andrew Peacock tried to dispense with him as deputy.)

Morrison showed in his impressive, unscripted Albury speech on Thursday that, like Howard, he is keen to talk about values. Policies are easier to sell and understand, decisions easier to accept, if voters know what values shape them.

A political professional and a pragmatist, Morrison rightly has discerned that the best way to put some distance between him and the turmoil of last month is to provide a marked difference in tone. He is sharpening the contrast with “Mr Harbourside Mansion” as much as he can — an understandable tactic but, given he believed the party should have stuck with Malcolm Turnbull, it underscores the ruthlessness of politics.

There is much to like about Morrison’s first fortnight in the job. In the blink of an eye he has made the Coalition more connected and responsive. Predicting polls is a fraught business but it is reasonable to expect a delayed honeymoon — and if it appears, he ought to consider riding it to an early election.

Daily leaks have cut across his messages. They seem to have come from Turnbull supporters still in parliament or former staff. Given Morrison was loyal to his prime minister, it is unlikely they are designed to nobble him. The aim seems to be staking out a Turnbull legacy, with Morrison suffering collateral damage, although the greater the failure from here, the more Turnbull supporters will claim vindication.

He has brushed off these distractions and stuck to his priorities, refusing to go on the defensive as Turnbull was wont to do. This demonstrates how he is a more skilled media communicator who handles even the most aggressive interviewers without rising to their bait.

That’s the good news. On the downside, there are signs Morrison may be making a similar mistake to Turnbull, only in reverse. When he took over, Turnbull needed to make it all about style and not change the substance of the Abbott government because it was fighting on all the right ground for the Coalition. But the new leader couldn’t resist the temptation to remake the Coalition in his own image, looking to neutralise most areas of conflict with Labor.

Turnbull looked better on those occasions he took up a cause: fighting for the gay marriage plebiscite, delivering a double-dissolution ultimatum on industrial relations and standing up to Donald Trump over the refugee deal. Eventually he made the fatal mistake of trying to do a bipartisan deal with Labor over climate policy and emissions reduction mechanisms — a move that clashed with the “axe the carbon tax” mandate that propelled the Coalition into government.

Morrison has a different imperative. Stressing his own style is all well and good — as long as it is authentic and especially when it is about being in touch and responsive — but he also must show voters the government has changed in character, in substance. Turnbull lost the leadership because he had taken the party to the left, so Morrison needs to show he is taking it back to the mainstream right-of-centre where it belongs. Climate and energy policy is key.

Much of the work is already done because on the eve of throwing open his position in a spill, Turnbull put his national energy guarantee legislation to one side as he knew a large cohort of his MPs would cross the floor to oppose it. This shelved immediate intentions to legislate the Paris emissions reduction targets and saw the authority drain from Turnbull's leadership.

But that bill (a bill for an act to amend legislation relating to emissions of greenhouse gases, and for other purposes) has not yet been repudiated as Coalition policy. Morrison and his Energy Minister, Angus Taylor, surely must act to drop it formally when MPs gather in Canberra next week. Despite splitting the energy and environment portfolios and demanding Taylor drive down power prices, Morrison repeatedly and emphatically has committed the Coalition to meeting the Paris targets. At Albury he said the targets would be met easily, "with no impact on electricity prices at all".

This posturing could get messy. Already several backbenchers are agitating to withdraw from Paris and former assistant minister Keith Pitt has rejected a frontbench position to argue this stance. Critics portray them as ideologues, whereas in fact supporting cheap energy is practical and pragmatic; it is making costly and futile climate gestures that is ideological.

It is one thing for Morrison to remain in Paris but it is quite another to place great store on meeting the targets. Most other signatories have no meaningful targets to meet or are on track to miss them. Our Prime Minister ought to make clear that if something needs to give on electricity prices, reliability or emissions targets, it is the climate goals that will be disregarded.

Instead he is stuck arguing a contradictory line: that the Paris emissions reductions can be delivered at no cost but Labor's higher targets will be costly. The truth is policies such as the renewable energy target that were designed and implemented to meet emissions reduction targets already have prompted the closure of large amounts of dispatchable generation in South Australia and Victoria, driving increases in prices and decreases in security of supply. Arguing

the Paris targets have no price impact is just bunkum; it is possible from this point forward only if we ignore how we got to this point. This sort of statement would be called out as a bald-faced lie by Labor, the ABC and most of the press gallery except that they are ideologically predisposed to climate gestures, no matter their cost.

Having seen Turnbull skewered for a second time on climate policy, Morrison must deliver clarity. He needs to remember the Coalition was elected in a landslide promising to undo costly climate interventions, not to implement them. Outside electricity, Paris could play havoc with farming, transport and energy exports.

The government's attacks on Bill Shorten also need to be more substantial. If there ever was a so-called "Kill Bill" strategy, it was misguided. Whether voters like the Opposition Leader or are suspicious of him is neither here nor there unless it can be parlayed into consequences. It matters that Shorten is a cipher of the unions and factions only if we are told what that means for policy. Does this mean borders will be less secure or strikes more common? The Coalition needs to join the dots. If he is a weathervane, will Shorten stand up for Australia's interest in foreign policy? Criticising Shorten without making these connections can only weaken the attacks and risks flattering him for the attention.

Politics and successful government, ideally, would be all about substance, but we know success demands a combination of style and substance. Increasingly in the digital age, the media demands more of the former and less of the latter. Yet election results usually bear out the fact voters want substance. While the media will always chase fashionable causes and highlight likeable or charismatic leaders, voters tend to go for parties that demonstrate conviction, clarity and competence — leaders who know what they stand for, clearly communicate their agenda and get most of it done without too many mishaps.

If Morrison runs a version of the Turnbull government, only with an approachable and down-to-earth style, he won't implode but he won't win. If he backs that up with a few substantial measures demonstrating his government is firmly rooted in mainstream Coalition territory, winning won't be out of the question.

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