

Scott Morrison must be his own man with his own agenda



Scott Morrison has successfully demonstrated a down-to-earth tone and appears much more in touch with the electorate than his predecessors.

Chris Kenny, Associate Editor, 11:00PM October 26, 2018

Imagine the mental gymnastics confronting Scott Morrison as he shapes up for daily meetings and phone calls in Canberra. He might have Tony Abbott on the speaker phone pushing for changes to energy policy, Malcolm Turnbull on hold wanting to discuss the Bali conference, and Barnaby Joyce texting about Turnbull and Bali.

Kerryn Phelps is waiting in the foyer to demand a 100 per cent renewable energy target, with Andrew Wilkie due in 15 minutes to insist on gambling controls.

Cathy McGowan's marching down the corridor, furious about a Nationals campaign to unseat her, Rebekha Sharkie following her because she doesn't want to miss out on any action. Adam Bandt is on Sky News calling the government's border protection policies cruel and inhumane, and the Prime Minister's view of the screen is blocked by Bob Katter's hat, from under which emanates a high-pitch rant about crocodile culling and foreign investment.

Everyone thinks they are in charge and they all have a personal agenda. Welcome to minority government with a large crossbench, fractured Coalition and buoyant opposition.

The Prime Minister is supposed to control the agenda but, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, every time he tries to solve one problem it seems to create another.

Hence a rushed announcement on our Israeli embassy aimed at winning votes in the Wentworth by-election doesn't work and exposes the government's cynicism; an overreaction to the partially leaked and dishonestly characterised recommendations of the Ruddock review on religious freedom prompts rushed new laws that come unstuck; and a quick fix with Indonesia to send Turnbull to a Bali conference opens internal schisms in the Coalition and sends mixed signals to the public.

Grappling with all this, it can't have been much comfort to Morrison this week to be surrounded by the ghosts of prime ministers past: Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard were in town, Abbott was on the backbench and Turnbull was front of mind. Morrison has served opposite or under all of them and, surrounded by these political spectres, he must have been wondering if he was like the Bruce Willis character in *The Sixth Sense* — the last person to realise he was already dead.

Morrison won't talk about why Turnbull was knifed and so is having enormous trouble explaining what his government intends to do differently. He has successfully demonstrated a down-to-earth tone, appears much more in touch, is highly engaged through relentless mainstream media interviews but, ultimately, hasn't changed much at all.

The Prime Minister needed to repudiate the national energy guarantee early because it was the policy driver for Turnbull's demise, even though it had been eviscerated in the former prime minister's final days as he tried to cling to power. (Has anyone stopped to think where Turnbull's polling numbers would have gone a week or two after that capitulation?) Now, as expected, Labor is picking up the NEG and the Coalition critique will seem late and disingenuous.

Presumably the reluctance to talk about the reason for changing prime ministers has been that Morrison, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and much of the cabinet were solidly behind the NEG. They can't accuse a cabinet they served in of drifting to the left, expose their own complicity in the NEG or draw attention to what is now a stark policy flip.

This has been a mistake. The NEG was Turnbull's signature policy and he was the one who gave in to pressure and stripped it bare in that final week. Under

Morrison the Coalition needed to recognise the error and disown the policy so that they could more plausibly refocus their energy policy on price and reliability. To be fair, they are trying to make that shift and separating the energy and environment portfolios has been a useful step — it is just that their pussyfooting around the leadership change means they missed a vital opportunity to underline the significance of the policy shift.

The fact Labor is now advocating the Turnbull policy bells the cat. Peter Dutton and the other conservatives who came within a whisker of taking the leadership would have dumped Paris and struck out afresh. Morrison needed to take that cue. He should remember that the Coalition came to power in a landslide promising to repeal Labor excesses on climate, not do a deal with them to extend emissions reduction measures and put more upward pressure on prices.

From opinion polls to over-interpretation of the Wentworth results and from posturing business groups and environmental activists to virtue-signalling - Coalition backbenchers, the government is told additional climate action is the way forward. Yet the schemes put in place already, such as the renewable energy target, are not complete and the electricity grid certainly has not adapted to them. And too many people forget that in the 2010, 2013 and 2016 elections, voters endorsed cautious policies on climate that prioritise lower energy costs.

If climate is set to be a major issue at yet another election — as seems clear — then Morrison must have a comprehensive policy that sits in stark contrast to Labor's reckless plan for a 50 per cent renewable energy target and 45 per cent emissions reduction goal. Getting into a climate compassion competition with Labor is the road to ruin, economically and politically.

There are a range of structural issues running in the government's favour. It confronts an opposition promising to increase taxes on personal incomes, retirement incomes, housing investments, company profits and, effectively, electricity prices. Bill Shorten is also promising a re-regulation of the labour market and a probable return to industry-wide bargaining action, winding back even the enterprise bargaining of past Labor governments.

On top of this, despite its record in blowing the budget and creating a historic debt problem, Labor promises higher spending. Critically, we can see its

resolve on border protection is wafer thin and subject to a green-left veto, raising the horrible prospect of a return to chaos and tragedy.

The economy is growing better than expected, unemployment is at a seven-year low and the budget is on the cusp of a return to surplus. Considering all this, it is foolish to write off the Coalition.

Perhaps it is helpful to look at the situation the other way around. Given the fundamentals of the economy and the prescriptions proposed by Labor, it has taken a power of incompetence and disunity from the Coalition to surrender electoral favouritism.

It did well this week attacking Labor's housing investment taxation and negative gearing changes. Debates like this need to be relentless. If it can unite behind a clear agenda while attacking Labor — remember the opposition floated through the 2016 election campaign without having to duck a punch or endure a negative advertising campaign — the government will stand a good chance. However, recent history suggests such cohesion and tactics might be beyond them.

All the thanks that Morrison received for refusing to trash Turnbull's NEG and nominating his predecessor for the Bali conference was to see the former prime minister refuse to lift a finger in Wentworth. Not only has the loss cost the government its majority but it denied the party a high-quality parliamentarian in Dave Sharma — a deeply depressing outcome when you consider some of the "talent" ensconced on the green leather.

It is time for Morrison to admit the government had drifted off course under Turnbull and for him to be unashamed about applying a corrective, especially on climate and energy. He doesn't need to overdo it because, as outlined, the fundamentals are strong.

A steady continuum from here will spell certain defeat. It will not be enough for the Morrison government to campaign on the best achievements of the Abbott and Turnbull governments. It can only succeed if it rapidly develops a character and agenda of its own, and engages in robust battles with Labor on areas of Coalition strength.

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