

# The most recognised member of the government isn't the Prime Minister

With 75 per cent of people able to recognise his name, he wasn't even the most recognised member of the government. That title went to a mere backbencher, Julie Bishop, with 82 per cent recognition.

The government's preoccupations with ideology and internal strife mean that it has failed to solve real problems in its introspective irrelevance. The country has given up on it.

"With that last leadership change, the response I saw was different" to the public's response to earlier coups, says qualitative pollster Tony Mitchelmore of the research firm Visibility.



Illustration: Jim Pavlidis *Credit:*

"They don't care about ScoMo versus Dutton versus Turnbull

versus Abbott. They just didn't care. It was just like, 'whatever'," Mitchelmore tells me. "This has been building for almost a decade – this sense of being fed up with politics, of changing leaders, of talking about themselves, about self-interest."

In one of Mitchelmore's focus groups, a man said, "Can't we outsource our government to New Zealand?"

Morrison is the chief personal beneficiary of the latest leadership upheaval, yet he is also a victim of the syndrome at the same time. He is Australia's prime minister, and nobody cares.

"The response," says Mitchelmore, formerly a Labor Party pollster, "was, 'What's the point? We're just getting on with our lives.' "

And so we are, at every level. The live sheep export trade, for instance. This week the industry announced it was suspending itself for three months. With the government still flailing around trying to properly respond to years of scandals and failures, the exporters themselves said "Enough!" There won't be any live exports for the three months of the coming northern hemisphere summer, the chairman of the Australian Livestock Exporters' Council, Simon Crean, announced this week.

Energy is another. After five years of failure, the government's latest attempt at a policy collapsed in the Parliament this week. It's not much of a policy, the so-called "big stick" to allow the forced divestment of electricity firms' assets if they don't set prices that the government likes.

It's such an intrusive and arbitrary policy that even Labor disdained it as a "Venezuelan-style" intervention into the market. The government has allowed Labor to look more pro-business and more responsible than the Coalition.

In the face of such absurdity and uncertainty, some big power companies are on an investment strike. The chairman of EnergyAustralia and former chair of the Business Council, Graham Bradley, said this week that the “big stick” would chill new investment in electricity generators.



Flagging interest ... Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Thursday.  
*Credit: Alex Ellinghausen*

“We are in desperate need of the certainty before EnergyAustralia can proceed with the investment in new capacity” to replace retiring coal-fired power plants like Liddell, Bradley told *The Australian*.

In the meantime, Australians are “getting on with our lives”, as Mitchelmore says, finding our own solutions. The number of Australian homes with solar panels on their roofs hit 2 million this week.

Companies are doing the same. There was a massive increase in large-scale solar panel installations in the year to the end of October. Approaching tenfold in a single year – a whopping 850 per cent, from 0.27 gigawatts to 2.3 gigawatts.

Together with household solar, the percentage of renewable

energy sources as a share of total energy sources connected to the grid reached 19.9 per cent.

What an irony that investment in coal power is stalled and solar power is soaring under a prime minister famous for accessorising his parliamentary appearances with a big lump of black coal.

After five years of Coalition failure to even produce a policy, Australians aren't waiting for the government a moment longer.

Now that the government doesn't command a majority in either of the houses of federal parliament, the rest of the political system is moving around the government to impose solutions to other long-standing problems, too. This week we saw Labor collaborating with the crossbench members of parliament to put together a new system for moving asylum-seekers in need of medical assessment from overseas processing sites to Australia.

To be fair to Morrison, he has taken steps in his brief tenure to get all the remaining children and families off Nauru and onto the Australian mainland. He said this week: "In the last three months I have taken 100 children off Nauru. There are 10 children on Nauru today."

And the US is still in the process of screening and accepting its share. There is progress; it's just too slow for community tolerance. Again, where the government has taken too long to find a solution, others are mobilising to find another way.

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The non-government forces in the House were ready to vote into law a bill that would allow offshore asylum-seekers, if assessed by two doctors as needing assessment in Australia, to be allowed to travel to Australia. The government claims that this is evidence that Labor wants to "start the boats again".

This is not true. Labor suffered searing political pain after its bungling of border policy.

Julia Gillard told me at the time that there were two reasons Labor lost its majority at the 2010 election under her leadership, forcing her into coalition with the Greens, according to Labor's own research. First was the leadership coup and the recriminations that followed, and second was Labor's failure to control the boats.

Labor is determined not to allow a repeat. That's why under Bill Shorten it adopted the government's boats turnback policy. And it's why Labor insisted that this new bill, moved by the new independent MP for Wentworth, Kerryn Phelps, retain the key principle of ministerial discretion.

That is, even if two doctors have attested that an asylum seeker needs to be medically assessed in Australia, the final decision rests with the minister for immigration. The minister can block any transfer on national security grounds. In effect, this is codifying what the Morrison government has been doing in any case.

But Morrison doesn't want to let an opportunity to torment Labor pass by. He claims that this will be marketed by people smugglers as an opening of the border. And, in that, he may well be right.

He seized on this to declare, rather excitedly, that "this is about Australia's safety and Bill Shorten is a clear and present threat to Australia's safety".

But the rest of the Parliament, like most of the country, has run out of patience with the government, and is imposing its own solution. The government allowed Parliament to move into summer recess rather than allow the Phelps bill to pass. Over the break, the government will no doubt succeed in bringing the final 10 kids from Nauru to Australia.

Meaning that no children will be in any offshore processing

site. But when Parliament resumes in February, the Phelps bill will await nonetheless.

A federal anti-corruption body is in the same category. The rest of the political system is ready to move to create a federal ICAC or IBAC-style body. The Greens first proposed this idea. Labor, seeking to fix its image problem after the Sam Dastyari case, decided to adopt it too. Only the government continues to hide behind the excuse that there is no corruption at the federal level, that it miraculously vanishes at the borders of the Australian Capital Territory. Canberra is protected by a magic force field of virtue, apparently.

This is absurd. The independent MP Cathy McGowan has proposed a bill to create a national integrity commission. The details need work but it, too, ultimately will succeed if the government fails to act.

The Parliament exists to solve problems, not host expensive parlour games. After five years, Australia has given up on the Coalition's ability to solve problems.

Unless it radically rewrites its agenda in the new year as it approaches the election, the Morrison government will be left behind, allowing Labor effortlessly to position itself as the party of the future.

The government's epitaph might well be the words spoken last week by Morrison's Minister for Financial Services, Kelly O'Dwyer – that the Coalition is seen as “homophobic, anti-women climate-change deniers”. And 2019 is almost upon us.

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