

The Victory of Small Visions in Australia: Scott Morrison Retains Government

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Asia-Pacific Research, May 30, 2019

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Politics](#)

Australian politics since the 1990s has been marked by a dedicated loathing of the “vision thing”. For those keen to see policies lasting beyond the life of the May fly, disappointment lies. Federal governments, at best, have shelf lives of three short years. Governments are effectively encouraged to be agents of small change if, indeed, they are to be agents of any change whatsoever. Anything beyond that is bound to be what Sir Humphrey Appleby in Yes Minister [terms “courageous”](#), so brave as to be an act of folly and a discouragement.

Opposition leader **Bill Shorten** of the Australian Labour Party never quite had it. He had, it is true, overseen the end of two prime ministers – **Tony Abbott** and **Malcolm Turnbull** – and came close to sneaking in during the 2016 election. But his stewardship of the federal Labor Party never cured that sense of a permanent “trust deficit”. Not even a phalanx of credible female politicians, aided by his wife’s support, were able to protect him against a highly personalised campaign that stressed the simple, the visceral, and, the importance of self-interest. The world might be burning, but what did that matter to retirees concerned about their share income from franked dividends?

Labor’s strategy had been geared towards a battle of details kept in a stuffing of income distribution. But the campaign got bogged down. Documents and policy statements were designed for the deposed Turnbull. With the coming to power of **Scott Morrison** after a palace coup in 2018, a sense of hopeless fun pervaded proceedings. This was not an election for him to win – keeping losses to a minimum would have been seen as an achievement of sorts.

Shorten, in contrast, exuded agitation and weariness. He seemed to wear the spectral crown of an impending coronation with discomfort. Morrison, in turn, revelled, getting his hands dirty, donning a baseball cap, making sporting analogies and being seemingly everywhere. A fossil he might have been, but a very enthusiastic campaigner he proved to be, leaving his opponent ragged.

The election was an object lesson of personal politics. Morrison made the election a matter of himself. He became a ventriloquist for the [“quiet Australian voters”](#). He muzzled other ministers, and patched over the fact that Coalition government had done away with two of its own prime ministers since winning power in 2013. Astonishingly, he could use the term “stability” and get away with it, masking the party’s own dysfunction and lurch to the right.

Climate change disappeared from coalition discussions; the environment minister, **Melissa Price**, went into hermetic hiding. Having given Indian mining giant Adani approval on water

management plans in the long battle of the Galilee Basin, the onus was on Labor to show their colours. In the process, they were wedged: to oppose Adani for environmental grounds sounded like a rebuke to miners, however fictional and disingenuous the projected figures of the Indian company were. Pro-Adani Labor members of parliament such as Cathy O'Toole in the North Queensland seat of Herbert were left in outer orbit from the metropolitan centres of Sydney and Melbourne.

There have already been attempts to see the Australian federal election of 2019 as a version of Trump 2016 or Brexit. Predictably, [similar venting](#) has taken place at the result, with despondent voters snorting on social media that they would move to New Zealand to escape the ignoramuses of the Australian populace.

The comparisons, and the responses, have been facile, and can only be sustained if you remain a continuing believer in the flawed witchdoctor's art of opinion polls. In other senses, the Australian federal election was won, and lost, along lines markedly similar to the 1990s. Queensland always tended to be out of reach, with Labor hugging the metropolitan regions and incapable of convincing rural and less urbanised dwellers that they were a safe option. When Labor did return to power in 2007 with Kevin Rudd at the helm, it did so with a leader from Queensland, and a figure billed as the ALP version of John Howard.

Throughout the Howard years, federal Labor found itself constantly incapable of recovering the "aspirational" blue collar voters who had found comfort in the arms of the conservative Coalition government. Howard's book-keeping ruthlessness and refusal to countenance abstract notions stood him in good stead. If you cannot reduce policies to spread sheets and ledgers, forget it. This came with a good dose of fright – terrorists, boat people, refugees – when needed.

Morrison's [own words](#) suggest a re-incarnation of Howard on several levels. Those who voted for him "have their dreams, they have their aspirations, to get a job, to get an apprenticeship, to start a business, to meet someone amazing, to start a family, to buy a home, to work hard and provide the best you can for your kids, to save for your retirement." This was cradle-to-grave simplicity.

Morrison's positioning of Labor as a penny-pinching tax agent with a spending agenda writ large did the trick. And even if the effect of their income distribution policies would have had virtually no impact on the blue collar vote let alone a good number of young voters, the damage was done: they were said to be going after hard earned cash and the precious share income of retirees. Rumours abounded in the state of Queensland that Shorten's Labor party might also be considering bringing back the [unpopular death tax](#). (Nothing of the sort had been planned, but rumours have remarkably agile wings.)

The victory of Morrison was, at its end, not for an idea, but an absence of ideas. There were no Periclean orations, and no concerns about the fate of humanity beyond elemental, immediate desires. Future elections are bound to repeat this pattern. The lengthy dossiers and policy manifestoes are bound to be scrapped, and targets kept small. But even as Morrison celebrates, his hardnosed strategists such as Liberal Senator Arthur Sinodinos are thinking how best [to pinch the ideas](#) of substance from the defeated Labor opposition. Even ad men need some tincture of substance from time to time.

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