

The Monthly

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The Monthly TODAY by Paddy Manning

Bad sport

The PM's upset election win looks very different now



Prime Minister Scott Morrison and then sports minister Bridget McKenzie in 2019. © Paul Braven / AAP Image



The stench of corruption is again wafting around the Morrison government, adding to the acrid bushfire smoke. The sports rorts affair, which is reaching up to the prime minister's own office, is especially odious, given that \$100 million in pork-barrelling surely helped Scott Morrison's upset, narrow win last year. Why else did they do

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and a looming Senate inquiry is going to replay the whole thing frame-by-frame, in lurid detail. The Coalition cheated at last year's election, pure and simple, and the lessons of its victory in May are very different now.

If it was a climate election won on a platform of doing nothing versus Labor's so-called economy-wrecking targets, then that debate has been turned on its head. Bill Shorten half-joked over the holidays, as he toured ravaged firegrounds, that he doesn't get questions about the cost of climate action anymore. It's the costs of inaction that are piling sky-high around us. Alternatively, if it was an election about economic management, the thinning budget surplus and ongoing stagnation as drought and bushfire take a toll through 2020 could well undermine the Coalition's claim to fame. Nothing that happens overseas – trade peace, a Trump win – will make up for malaise felt at home, if it continues. Or, if the last election was a culture war, well Scotty from Marketing has wasted his five minutes of cultural sunshine, sitting on a Hawaiian beach while his country burned.

The Australian's Peter van Onselen **revealed** [\$] on Saturday that two of Morrison's staffers were closely involved in handling funding applications under the community sports program. As Michael Pascoe **writes** in *The New Daily* today, the PM's language when questioned on this is strange. When asked by 3AW's Neil Mitchell whether Liberal Party officials were involved, he replied, "Not that I can speak of." Lynton Crosby's **observations** [\$] that Morrison's critics are simply doubling down because his victory confounded them are hardly convincing. There is much more at stake here. As *The Conversation's* Michelle Grattan **wrote** last week, there are some obvious parallels with the 1993 election, an upset victory for Labor's true believers that turned sour very quickly.

Crikey's William Bowe **wrote** [\$] last week that the program was "transparently tailored to boost the Coalition's electoral prospects", but argued that it made no difference to the election result, which was won at the macro level rather than at the micro level of individual marginal seats. Maybe, but consider the counter-factual: just say the Liberals' Nicolle Flint, who won the South Australian seat of Boothby by a few thousand votes and is sitting on a margin of 1.4 per cent, had not had \$1.7 million to **hand out** and had fallen short? Instead of a one-seat working majority in the lower house, the government could be relying on the support of the crossbench, vulnerable to threats from every potential floor-crosser.

In any case, it's beside the point. When the Australian Cricket team is busted ball-tampering, nobody cares whether it won them any wickets. It's foul play, which should be, or used to be, un-Australian. Don't buy the cynical line that just because Labor's Ros Kelly did the same thing in 1993, rorts have been happening on both sides forever and it's all par for the course. Kelly paid the price, stepping down from the ministry, and her subsequent resignation from the parliament dealt a hammer-blow to the Keating government in the Canberra byelection of 1995.

It is already disappointing that the Morrison government last year **missed** its own end-of-2019 deadline to introduce legislation for a national integrity commission. It is already remarkable that scandal-prone ministers like Angus Taylor and Michaelia Cash have hung on to their jobs. The public couldn't give a hoot whether Bridget McKenzie's position as deputy Nationals leader makes it difficult for Morrison to sack her, or presents factional difficulties for Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack. Her position as a cabinet minister is untenable and – following this afternoon's Sky News Australia **report** that concerns were raised within her own office – weakening on a daily basis. If the upshot of the review due this week by the PM's departmental secretary, Phil Gaetjens, is that there are no consequences for such flagrant rorting – as Barnaby Joyce is today **tipping** [\$] – then it will be the final nail in the coffin for the integrity of the Morrison government.

