

The Monthly

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The Monthly TODAY by Paddy Manning

Shameless
Scott Morrison defends the indefensible



There was no contrition or reflection in Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s set-piece year-opener at the National Press Club today – on his holidays or the bushfire crisis or sports rorts or anything – so how can there possibly be a reboot of his government’s political fortunes? Instead, Morrison delivered a well-worn defence of his government’s record on economic management and climate change, and dodged hard questions about the role of his own office in administering the scandalous Community Sport Infrastructure Grants Program, and even on the

principle of whether a government should distribute public funds for personal political gain. Morrison's answer on that last point was nonsense – “Do I believe the sun should come up tomorrow? Yes I do, and it will!” – and he slipped in a nasty dig at the public service, pretending that it's only politicians who are accountable to their communities. So Australia starts 2020 exactly as it ended 2019, in all kinds of trouble with a prime minister in denial.

The prime minister appears to believe that if he trots out a few motherhood statements – about girls getting change rooms, or the importance of sport in local communities – the quiet Australians will all nod back off to sleep. He is right to the extent that 34 per cent of Australians, according to *Guardian Australia's* Essential poll today, have not been following the issue. (Combine those with the 15 per cent of diehards who continue to support embattled former sports minister Bridget McKenzie and... the government is certainly in business.) But for anyone paying more than the faintest of attention, those motherhood statements just rub salt in the wound: half a million dollars, ostensibly for a girls change room, went to an Adelaide club without no girls team; the importance of local sport is *exactly* why the communities behind every meritorious application that missed out because they were in the wrong electorate will be furious. If the PM thinks the community shares his own rose-tinted view of the local government MP or Coalition candidate handing out taxpayers' money to suit themselves, he is completely out of touch.

Let's dig into what the PM really said today: on the involvement of his office in distributing the grants, what I heard was that Morrison's staff were right in the thick of it and, furthermore, Morrison sees absolutely nothing wrong with that. Here's what he said, verbatim: “What prime ministers have always done is supported their colleagues when matters are raised with them, and that has been done since time immemorial for prime ministers to relay those positions on to the relevant ministers in those programs, and that's the role that my office played. All we did is provide information based on the representations made to us, as every prime minister has always done.”

When the ABC's political editor Andrew Probyn, holding up the colour-coded chart he **revealed** yesterday, asked the PM what he would say to those sporting clubs who applied in good faith but missed out for the wrong reasons, Morrison took a trip down memory lane, back to when he was minister for social services in the Abbott government. He recalled leaving a bunch of funding decisions to his department, and was appalled to find that wonderful community organisations (read: religious, I'll bet) that had been providing emergency cash relief and playgroups were “all defunded ... it was just stripped away from them”. So he went back and overrode the department. In all cases, it turns out Morrison is telling us to just leave the decision-making to the politicians. “You know, politicians, ministers, members of parliament, we're part of our community, we know what's happening in our community, we're in touch with our community, we know the things that can make a difference. And it's important because we're accountable to those people in our communities for getting stuff done.”

Decoded, it's yet more Joh-speak, straight out of the moonlight state: ‘don't you worry about that’. The more we get to know this prime minister, the more radical it seems he is.

