

Unethical behaviour in Australian federal politics

Roberto Bergami¹

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Abstract: Whilst it is generally accepted that politics and ethics are an uneasy match at times, there is still an expectation from the electorate that politicians elected to positions of public power behave in the best interest of the nation and its constituents. Such notions have come under attack in Australia during the term of the previous federal government. Between 2019 and 2022 an unprecedented level of unethical behaviour by public officials has been on display, with accountability and transparency featuring very low in decisionmaking processes. A string of scandals that has plagued the previous government have included the questionable distribution of government funding to sporting bodies and the building of car parks in hand-picked electorates, with the aim of strengthening the chances of re-election. Other grants have also come to be questioned, including the award of nearly half a billion dollars to a small foundation after the tender process was bypassed. The latest saga involved the previous Prime Minister (PM) secretly amassing an extra five ministries in secret, in cahoots with the Governor General (the monarchical representative), who himself became embroiled in a controversial financial grant allocation after personally lobbying the PM for the award. Unethical behaviour appears to be on the increase and there is a need to take action to prevent the further erosion of public trust in government officials. This paper highlights major events of concern during the last term of government, and concludes by suggesting a range of remedies, such the establishment of a federal anti-corruption body, the legal codification of the role of the Governor-General, and enhancing ministerial standards through regulations.

Keywords: ethics, politics, public officials, politicians, transparency, accountability

JEL Classification: D73, D71

1 Introduction

The focus of this paper is on events that have occurred at the Australian federal political level during the course of the Morrison government, focusing in particular, between the period 2019 - 2022. This is not a party political paper, as the issues discussed herein would equally apply to any political party in power at the time. The intention of this paper is to draw attention to gaps in governance legislation and regulation that have enabled individuals to behave in a questionable manner, one that appears to lack ethical considerations and is shrouded in an absence of transparency and accountability. In this context, the paper aims to provide suggestions for future generic remedies to the current controversies, regardless of which political party may rule in the future.

As the events discussed in this paper are contemporary, there is a dearth of information available in the public domain, making a formal literature review impossible. Virtually all of the reporting to date has been via the media providing summary briefs lacking in-depth analysis.

By way of background, to provide a greater understanding of the decision-making process in Australian federal politics, a summary of the Australian culture, according to Hofstede's (2022) theory, is given at Figure 1. Aspects of the Australian culture will be referred to later in the paper.

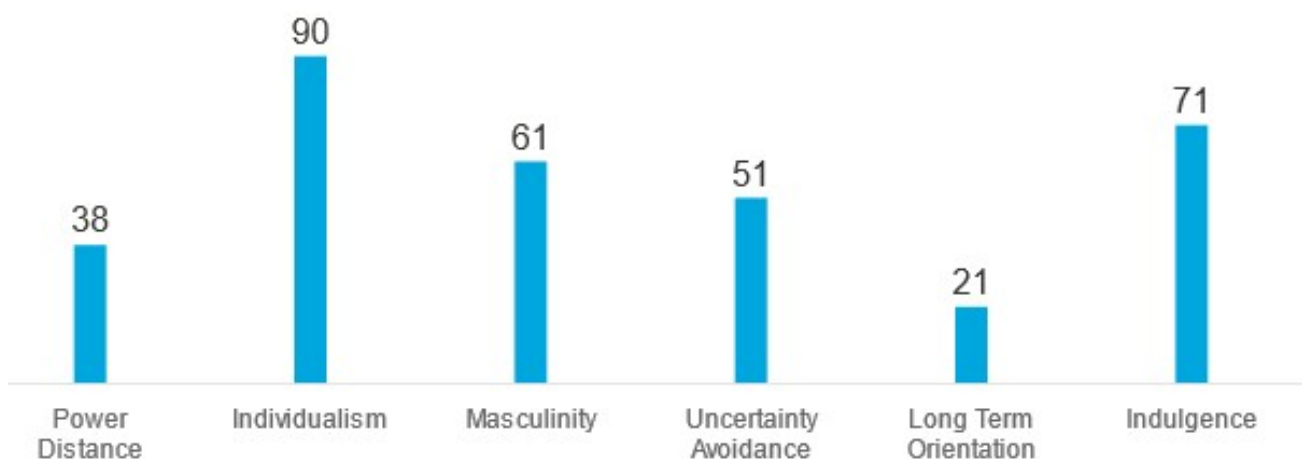
Hofstede's (2022) six dimensions for Australia are summarised below:

1. **Power distance** „is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally“. Australian culture, with a score of 38, has a low power distance with a hierarchical structure of convenience with high flow formal and informal communications between different layers of organisational structure;

¹ University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Department of Trade, Tourism and Languages, Studentská 13, 370 05 České Budějovice, Czech Republic, rbergami@ef.jcu.cz.

2. **Individualism** is „the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members. It has to do with whether people’s self-image is defined in terms of “I” or “We”. In Individualist societies people are supposed to look after themselves and their direct family only“. Australia is a highly individualistic society as reflected by the high score of 90. Cynically, in the eyes of some, it may be argued this is the ideal environment for politicians who tend to look after themselves;
3. **Masculinity** „indicates that the society will be driven by competition, achievement and success, with success being defined by the “winner” or “best-in-the-field.” This value system starts in school and continues throughout one’s life – both in work and leisure pursuits. Australia, with a score of 61, has a masculine society, meaning the goals is to ,win‘ in life, in a ,winner takes all‘ approach. This is perhaps well suited to politicians who enjoy winning against opposition;
4. Uncertainty avoidance is the „way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? ... The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these“. Although uncertainty avoidance does not feature particularly high in Australian culture with a score of 51, recent events in federal politics may well shake the belief that institutions that are capable of avoiding ambiguity do exist;
5. Long term orientation „describes how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future, and societies prioritise these two existential goals differently. Normative societies which score low on this dimension, for example, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion“. Australia falls into this category, with a low score of 21, consequently, they have a strong concern for establishing the absolute truth, have respect for traditions, low emphasis on saving for the future, and are motivated in achieving quick results. The quest for the truth has probably been seen in the resulting exposure of controversial political decisions, and the quick result approach is seen in some government programs; and
6. Indulgence is “the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised“. Indulgence indicates relatively weak control, whereas restraint indicates strong control. Australia, with a score of 71, has an indulgent culture meaning there is a tendency to materialise desires and impulses for enjoying life and having fun. This means they generally have a positive attitude, are optimistic and regard leisure time, act as one pleases and spend money as they wish as being important aspects of their life.

Figure 1 The six dimensions of Australian culture



Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/australia/>

Having provided an overview for the Australian culture, the next section considers various definitions of ethics as they may apply to politics.

2 Ethics

A definition of ethics is the focus on „the creation of a moral compass” (Natale & Libertella, 2016, p. 35). Indeed Ristovski (2017) argues that „morality and ethics as social categories are crucial for generating a sound political culture in any

society. Through the process of political socialization these categories influence not only the culture in a nation, but its political ideologies as well“ (p. 91). Dictionary definitions of ethics ("Cambridge ", 2022; "Dictionary," 2022) also reflect a focus on ethics as being a guiding philosophy; principles of conduct governing an individual or a group; a set or system of moral issues or aspects; the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation; a consciousness of moral importance; and the study of what is morally right and wrong, or a set of beliefs about what is morally right and wrong. Morality is, therefore, one of the central tenets of ethics and, consequently, so is ethical behaviour.

The focus of this paper is to highlight a series of questionable decisions that were taken under the Morrison Liberal government, consequently, it is important to define governmental unethical behavior. „Unethical behaviour in government is viewed as a situation where there is fraudulent or dishonest conduct or improper behaviour by people who are in positions of power. Bribery, extortion, embezzlement, the use of legislated powers by government officials for illegitimate private gain, nepotism, rent seeking, etc, are some examples for unethical behaviour in government“ (Aktan, 2015, p. 63). According to Roth (2004) „ethics and politics are normally considered domains that do not mix. In fact, domains that have little to do with one another“ (p. 1), yet, there is a need for these domains to meet, for otherwise we fail to meet the basic principle of utilitarianism, which is that „the right thing to do is whatever will promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people“ (p.51). As governments run the nation and their decisions affect the population at large, these processes ought to consider core ethical principles, in order to avoid corrupt behaviour. This is necessary because „political corruption affects each nation-state differently, but the outcomes are nominally the same: a deficit of public trust, weakened government institutions and undermined political systems“ (de la Rama M. J., Lester M. E., & Staples, 2022, p. 1) .

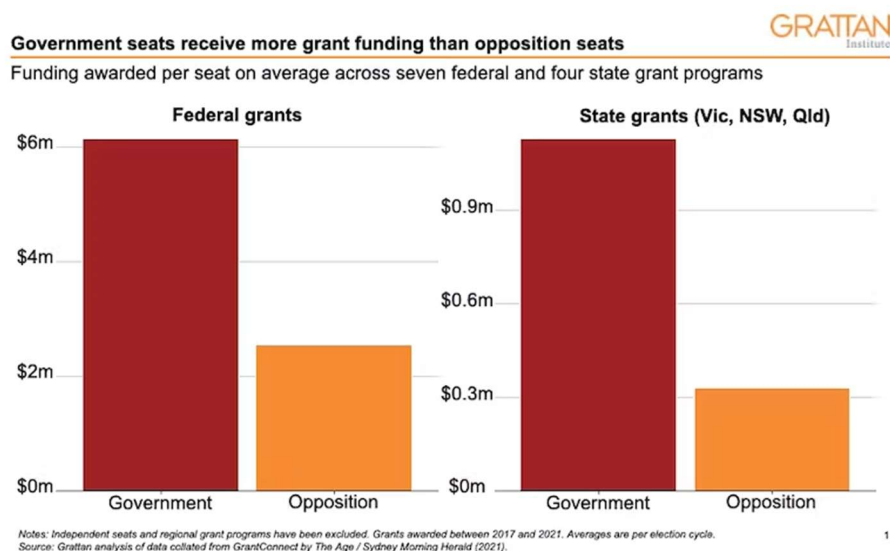
„The legitimacy of corruption cannot be analysed without simultaneously addressing the legitimacy of public office or entrusted power“ (Kolstad, 2012, p. 242). It is known that politicians are presented with difficult decisions that, at times, requires them to prioritise and take courses of action that should, at least in theory, result in the best outcome for the nation and the electorate. Yet, at times, this may not be so as, among other things, lobbying interests influence politicians. It is also known that politicians have a strong desire to remain in power, and that means being re-elected. It is perhaps this desire that contributes to the development of unethical behaviour, with one of the most popular Australian methods used to retain power being pork barrelling, discussed in the next section.

3 Pork barrelling

Pork barrelling is the „use of public resources to target certain voters for partisan purposes – for example, by spending public money in particular electorates to try to win more votes rather than spending those funds where they are most needed. Using grants to buy votes is one of the most visible forms of pork-barrelling. Grants processes often allow substantial ministerial discretion with little transparency“ (Griffiths, Stobart, & Wood, 2022), and described as „an ideal vehicle for delivering pork“ (Connolly, 2020, p. 29).

Both sides of politics use pork barrelling, but whoever is governing has discretionary power to decide where funding is channelled. As shown in Figure 2, government grants at both federal and state levels favour the incumbent, regardless of which party is in power. For example, NSW has a Liberal (right wing) government, whereas Victoria and Queensland have Labor (left wing) governments.

Figure 2 Government grants allocations



Source: <https://grattan.edu.au/news/pork-barrelling-is-a-waste-of-taxpayer-money-heres-how-to-stop-it/>

However, during the course of the previous Morrison government, it would appear that pork barrelling reached new heights. A number of decisions were made that were considered scandalous, once their details emerged. Due to length constraints, this paper concentrates on what were arguably the two most contentious discretionary funding decisions on separate federal grant government allocations: the sports grants and the car park grants.

3.1 Sport grants rorts

This funding scheme, amounting to 100 million Australian dollars, was devised and put in place just prior to the 2019 election, in what was subsequently recognised as being an exercise of voter influence in marginal seats. In fact the government „had kept sending out grants while in caretaker mode, after the election was called (in breach of caretaker conventions)“ (Napier-Raman, 2020). An investigation by the Auditor-General, found that „the award of grant funding was not informed by an appropriate assessment process and the successful applicants were not those who had been assessed as most meritorious“ (Auditor-General (Cth), 2019, p. 6). This “scandal was particularly controversial as 43% of approved grant applications were in fact ineligible to receive funding” (McIlroy, 2020). Therefore, two concurrent issues emerged: a breach of the caretaker conventions and the skewness of the grants allocation. The fallout from this scandal was the resignation of the responsible minister, not because of alleged improper behaviour over the funding scandal, but rather, over an undeclared membership to a gun club that was deemed to be a “conflict of interest”. The minister in question was subsequently reinstated to a senior position in the Morrison government – a ‘no-fault behaviour’ approach in full display.

3.2 Commuter car park rorts

This was a 660 million Australian dollars commuter car park administration fund, found to have been ineffectively administered. „The minister had distributed the grants with “inadequate assessment” for eligibility. The auditor-general’s report found 77% of the commuter car park sites selected were in Coalition [Liberal government] electorates, rather than in areas of real need with congestion issues. Damningly, none of the 47 project sites selected for funding commitment were proposed by the department. This suggests there has been extensive ministerial interference in the funding decision-making” (Ng, 2021). This provided a clear example of pork barrelling, so much so that this program was commonly referred to in the media as ‘car porks’ in an obvious reference to vote buying behaviour. In fact, most of the promised car parks were “promised in Melbourne’s east and south-east where the Liberal Party was defending a string of marginal electorates in 2019” (Wright & Curtis, 2022).

4 Other questionable events

Apart from the pork barrelling examples outlined above, other events have also highlighted questionable behaviour, as outlined below.

4.1 French submarine deal

Australia had chosen France’s Naval group as the successful bidder for new electric-diesel submarines over alternative bidders from Germany and Japan. The project had started, but was cancelled by the Morrison government in favour of a

new deal with the UK and the US - the AUKUS pact. The decision to terminate the Naval deal was shrouded in secret and the rationale provided for scrapping the French deal was that Australia needed to increase its stealth with a new generation of submarines, which, incidentally were going to be nuclear powered. This was a monumental event, by default, it meant that Australia had become a nuclear power overnight, without any discussion about this in the broader community. The scrapping of the French deal cost the Australian taxpayer 555 million Euro – not an insignificant sum. Additional to this cost is the uncertainty of the nuclear submarine availability which is projected not to occur until 2040, leaving Australia with a 20 year defence gap. By the time 2040 comes around, who knows whether the currently designed and planned submarines will still be a good choice, or whether submarines will be redundant as a defence mechanism.

4.2 Secret ministries

After the defeat of the Morrison government in 2022, it was revealed that „between March 2020 and May 2021, Morrison appointed himself minister of health, finance, home affairs, treasury and industry — moves that appeared to have given him powers equal to the ministers already appointed to those positions“ (Associated Press, 2022). This process went against all conventions and good principles of governance. Morrison explained that as he took no active decision-making in those portfolios, it was not a matter for concern and, in any case, he did it because of the Covid-19 pandemic, although by 2021 there was little, if any, in the way of emergency powers in place. The fact that the ministries were approved in secret has to be questioned – there is no transparency, but a high degree of personal control that seems to have been exercised in these circumstances. Given ministerial posts require the approval of the Governor-General (the Queen's/King's representative, as Australia has a monarchical constitution), their surrounding secrecy brings into question the role and purpose of the Governor-General's office. Apparently there is no Governor-General diary entries for these ministerial appointments, in itself a curious situation – why all the secrecy? Morrison has demonstrated tendencies of complete control during his tenure as Prime Minister and he defended his actions by claiming that „as prime minister, he was responsible for everything — “every drop of rain, every strain of the virus, everything that occurred over that period of time ... I believed it was necessary to have authority, to have what were effectively emergency powers, to exercise in extreme situations that would be unforeseen, that would enable me to act in the national interests” (Associated Press, 2022). One has to question whether the claim that a human is responsible for natural events like drops of rain or virus strains, are credible, or whether they represent a Messiah complex – an appropriate question given Morrison espoused strong religious faith, in itself a curious point, given that some of his alleged actions, such as lack of transparency and looseness with the truth may have contradicted principles of Christian values. There is no accusation against the individual, just observations of concern.

4.3 Governor-General personal lobbying

It was discovered that the Governor-General, through personal lobbying, had managed to get an allocation of 18 million Australian dollars from Morrison for a foundation called Australian Future Leaders Program. „The foundation came under intense scrutiny during former Mr Morrison's final month in office, with the government confirming the funding was awarded without a competitive tender to a charity that didn't appear operational and which did not have a website, staff or an office“ (Robertson, 2022). Why would the Governor-General personally lobby for such an organisation? Is there a link between this and the secret five ministries? There is no accusation, but these circumstances leave one to wonder about the behind the scenes machinations. It is extraordinary that an allocation of public funding could be done in such a manner. The Albanese Labor government, who won the 2022 election, has now confirmed that the funding for that (non-existent) entity has been withdrawn.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

Under the Morrison government, Australians have witnessed a spate of questionable political decision-making processes, demonstrating a lack of ethical fortitude, little transparency and a web of mis-truths and obfuscations, all designed to maintain control and secrecy over processes and behind the scene machinations.

No doubt, much of this was driven by the desire to remain in power, but also by the short-term orientation and individualism aspects of the Australian culture. In summary, this may be simply reduced to: I will look after myself now and will not be too concerned about others or the future. Both of these aspects do not augur well for sustainability and an improvement of the status quo to the benefit of Australian society. An increased suspicion of politicians' behaviour and a concurrent decrease in government and democratic principles has taken place and these matters need to be addressed and reversed. Among other things, the wasteful disbursement of taxpayer money on ill-conceived grants and questionable decisions on other matters outlined in this paper have essentially robbed taxpayers the opportunity of better healthcare and education opportunities. Australia now sits at its lowest historical point on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, and no longer in the top 10 category. This cannot be good for the nation's reputation, and it may increasingly become the target of international bad actors, seeking to exploit corruption possibilities. Therefore, to begin

a period of cultural influence for the better, based on the examples of questionable behaviour highlighted in this paper, the following recommendations are offered:

1. The code of conduct for parliamentarians be codified through laws or regulations, imposing greater transparency on behaviours and possible conflicts of interest disclosures, as well as penalties for breaches of these laws/regulations, in order to avoid future questionable behaviour, such as secret ministerial appointments;
2. All grants projects above a certain base line, for example 10 million dollars, be subject to parliamentary multi-party oversight, to ensure there is no repeat of past grant-skewing to influence voters;
3. All matters of national interest, such as defence spending, be subject to a parliamentary multi-party panel review prior to approval, to avoid a repeat of the submarine debacle;
4. A federal anti-corruption commission be established with broad-based powers to investigate public officials and third parties, through public hearings as necessary. The inclusion of third parties is necessary as these may influence politicians' behaviour and may stand to gain illegitimately from political decisions. This body should be independently funded and only subject to multi-party government oversight, to ensure no party political interference occurs; and
5. The role of the Governor-General should be codified via an act of parliament, to ensure clarity on the authority and responsibilities this office has, especially due to the extraordinary current powers this office can wield – for example in 1975 an elected Australian Prime Minister was deposed through the powers exercised by this office, but to date no codification of such powers exist. The alternative is to change the constitution and make Australia a republic, thereby removing this office altogether.

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