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# COMMENTARY

GREG SHERIDAN

## High time for urgent and serious self-defence

The Morrison government's decision to establish a missile manufacturing industry is one of our nation's most important strategic decisions in decades. Of course, we have to be watchful of the distance between announcement and delivery. But the government is proceeding with real urgency. That is fantastic for nothing has been more lacking in defence over the past 15 years than urgency.

Peter Dutton has a chance to be a significant defence minister after a long trail of spectacularly unimpressive defence minister performances. Since Kevin Rudd's election in 2007 we have had as defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon, John Faulkner, Stephen Smith, David Johnston, Kevin Andrews, Marise Payne, Christopher Pyne, Linda Reynolds and now Dutton.

Dutton has several other big tasks. Redefining the submarine project in the public eye is one of them. Both Reynolds and Payne abjectly failed to explain the rationale for submarines generally or the benefits of the French subs specifically.

This astounding dereliction of duty by a government that created a vacuum that has been substantially filled by nuts, cranks and a variety of people of goodwill with no knowledge. This is desperately damaging for the national interest. Our military program lacks public credibility. The real worry now is that the public perception, wholly wrongly, has become so toxic that it cannot be readily changed.

This could even mean that the government itself finds it more attractive to have public arguments with the French command, Naval Group, over price, schedule, Australian content, whatever, than to make any constructive argument about subs themselves.

Inevitably the government needs to do a bit of that, which is to be expected. The urgency of new defence capabilities, but it must also lay out why we need subs and what they can do for us. There are things we can do to enhance our submarine capability in the meantime — Collins upgrades, unmanned underwater vehicles, our own anti-submarine capabilities — the government should make a long list of things we can do. Maybe even try a few capability decisions — Tomahawk missiles — that might help politically.

Dutton needs to make the Defence establishment hurry up. Launching defence ministers for the past 15 years. Defence has got into the habit of working at its own leisurely pace. The individual's pace.

Should Morrison win re-election it would be a good thing for the nation if Dutton settled in to defence for at least another full parliamentary term. Defence could certainly do with a strong minister who stayed in place for several years.

But that is long term. Dutton has at most 14 months before the next election and there are big things he needs to accomplish. He must increase Australia's strategic weight, our ability to hit any potential enemy and to keep it at a distance, and our ability to support the US militarily if necessary in this region.

He must increase our national resilience, our ability to withstand shocks, to secure supply chains, to prevent in any emergency any capacity to draw a national debate, or a defence program, back to order if it went awry.

To appoint such ineffective prime ministers who made those appointments. Still, the past is a foreign country and, as Lenin had it, the only question that counts is what is to be done?

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DAILY CARTOON | JOHN SPOONER



NIKI SAVVA

## Backing, not sacking, MPs comes at a cost

There were several more steps Scott Morrison could have taken to mitigate the impact of the trifecta of scandals that have singled his government like so many lightning bolts from the heavens.

Keeping his ranks stocked with the halt, the lame and the tame was not one of them. Morrison's reluctance to sack, not sack, MPs in stride, no matter the offense, will not improve the core business of providing good government.

His first duty as prime minister should be to respect and serve all Australians, men and women, by surrounding himself with the best possible team he can muster.

The more competent his ministers are, the better he looks. Obviously the reverse is true. He should stop bending his knee to those behind him because he gets heart flutters when he counts the numbers. That can only end very badly.

And while on the subject of respect, he personally should have invited Brittany Higgins to meet with him rather than asking her through the media.

He should have booted those dragging him down, taking the same approach as Gladys Berejlik and John Barilaro did over the scandalous behaviour of Michael Johnson, who has resigned from the NSW parliament, then girded himself for an election later this year if they quit. They might even be doing him a favour.

Imagine if this time next year Morrison is still at war with the states over the vaccination rollout and even more women have concluded he is a boogymonger. Arguing he's simply doing his fute. Ask Julia Gillard how that worked out for her. She was held hostage inside parliament by Craig Thomson, then stalked outside it by Kevin Rudd. In minority government, Gillard needed the vote of the disgraced Thomson, so clinging to him for dear life.

Plunged over in all the romance of her misogynist speech in parliament is the fact she made it to defend Liberal rat Peter Slipper, who had been enticed into accepting the speakership by Anthony Albanese to consolidate Labor's numbers on the floor. Slipper had been caught sending crude, lewd misogynist text messages to a young man, prompting two independents to threaten to withdraw support for her government if he remained as the face of parliament.

Morrison is not being stalked. His Speaker, Tony Smith, is one of the best in modern times and a million miles away from Slipper. However Morrison's inability to relate to modern Australia, too often looking like a man out of his time and out of his depth, has drawn unfavourable contrasts with his deputy, the Treasurer, John Frydenberg, whom Labor figures now concede could pose a bigger threat than Morrison.

That thought will no doubt increase Morrison's spasm levels. Every leader suffers from them. He should do his best to suppress them. No one today is counting, no one today is even remotely thinking of challenging. His MPs would obviously relax more if the stopped stuffing up, say by not calling Marie Paye the prime minister for women. It was too cute by half, leaving him open to ridicule as the prime minister in fact.

Thanks to a penchant for sloganeering, Morrison cheapened the importance of what he was doing to enhance Payne's role, promote older women, establish a new task force designed to give them a stronger voice inside the government and of course to surround himself with a band of Anzacs to counter Labor's F-bomb squad, which has smashed him every day for weeks — F in this case being female.

Payne, one of the great survivors of Liberal civil wars, is also the only defence minister in decades to move on to something better; however, Peter Dutton will do well in a portfolio renowned as a graveyard for many politicians. Dutton and Payne are pals again. They fell out during the leadership battles in 2018. Dutton says they hugged it out later, shared a wine and got back on track.

Payne shows whenever she fronts she is a very good media performer. Her problem is she doesn't do it often enough. Linda Reynolds struggled on all fronts. It was a bad combination. Dutton will relish the opportunity to renege himself in an important rule that it can always get worse, it would help free Morrison from his pledge to full term.

He could do what Peter Gowin did in Tasmania, declare parliament unworkable, then call an election. So worried are some Labor MPs they even think Morrison might engineer so that he can go any time after the September football finals.

Morrison has six weeks until including the budget to convince people to forget the previous six weeks and focus instead on the promise of what lies ahead. If he stabilises, he should think seriously about an election sooner rather than later.

Weeks ago the PM declared a policy of zero tolerance for misbehaviour, then acted like he meant it. He avoided bits of RNA that stick together to make double helices, the body responded best, with a measured immune response against the protein the RNA encoded.

And these vaccines work. Pfizer and Moderna showed that mRNA technology rapidly can produce stunningly effective vaccines. People now are asking whether humanity could make a vaccine against the common cold. An mRNA vaccine against malaria is being trialled. We hope it's a game changer. Such mRNA vaccines are quick, they can be changed rapidly (as pathogens change and new strains emerge) and they seem to be more effective than any one had hoped.

And vaccines are just part of the story. Delivering RNA represents a new mechanism for helping the body to generate its own therapeutic agents. This field is just beginning. Now is the time for Australia to get behind it.

What we need is long-term thinking, political will and a rekindling of our government's confidence in backing Australia's ability.

Merlin Crossley is deputy vice-chancellor academic and professor of molecular biology at UNSW Sydney. Richard Holden is professor of economics at UNSW Sydney and president-elect of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

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MELISSA CONLEY TYLER

## Return of Chinese students benefits everyone

This week federal Education Minister Alan Tudge played down expectations that international students might return to Australia. He should keep an open mind. With China's support it is possible to develop a model to enable students to come back. This would be a welcome circuit-breaker when the Australia-China relationship is at a low point.

Nearly 65,000 Chinese international students are stuck overseas. Many have shown great commitment by continuing their studies online, but it is taking a toll. With no easing of border restrictions, new enrolments are in free fall and universities face job losses. Australian and Chinese students should work together to enable Chinese students to return. This issue is not intrinsically contentious and it invests in the future of the relationship — in youth.

A model for bringing Chinese students back to Australia could include some combination of pre-departure vaccination, quarantine, testing, chartered flights and self-isolation in Australia. If evidence of vaccine efficacy is sufficient, it could be enough for China to provide a pathway for students to return with proof of vaccination and negative test results. If additional safeguards are necessary, returning both in higher education and in the flow-on economic benefits from housing, food and services.

China would benefit from a feed-good story focused on ordinary Chinese and people-to-people engagement. It would show China willing to allow some thaw in the relationship, which may be important in dealing with the US. There are sticking points that need to be managed. China will need to go back on its advice to reconsider studying in Australia because of racist incidents. We can help China do this by announcing a program to combat racism and promote students' safety.

On its side, Australia will need to show flexibility in its quarantine model. The Singapore quarantine hub plan shows the government is more open to new options. It just needs to apply the same thinking to getting students back.

There is the question of cost, which would be substantial. This would need to be shared among those that benefit: students, universities, state and territory governments, the federal government and the Chinese government. Details such as capacity, timing and priority groups can be hammered out in negotiations. There's no need to get every jurisdiction on board; it is likely that some of the ACT and South Australia would be early movers.

Importantly, direct Canberra-Beijing negotiations would not be needed, at least initially, thereby avoiding loss of face. From the Chinese side, discussions could be co-ordinated by the embassy in Canberra. In Australia, other actors could take the lead, including vice-chancellors, state and territory governments and accommodation providers. Once an acceptable model is worked up, this can then be endorsed by the commonwealth.

Working with China on returning students does not compromise Australia's interests. It is a win-win proposition with most of the benefits falling on Australia's side. With indications that China would be willing to work on bringing students back, our government would be self-destructive to pass up this opportunity.

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