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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 50 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.

Poor fellow, my country. That's nine defence ministers in 14 years. That's nuts. Some of those ministers were capable but were in the job for only five minutes. Defence policy was at its worst under Rudd and Julia Gillard. Defence spending fell to its all-time historic low, not a single Australian ship was commissioned and nothing was done towards getting new submarines.

Tony Abbott's biggest single mistake was appointing Johnston as defence minister, just as Morrison's biggest mistake was appointing Reynolds. Both of them good people, neither was remotely up to the job. Their political failures became policy failures. Importantly, neither had

any capacity to draw a national debate, or a defence program, back to order if it went awry. To appoint such ineffective people to such a critically important position reflects poorly on the prime minister 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?

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 prevail in any emergency.

Lockdowns have shaken long-held assumptions about the world. The future frigates program needs a lot of work and maybe we were wrong to put so much emphasis on our allied relationship with the Brits, whose frigate was not completed when we bought it, and should have looked to the Italian frigate that has since been bought by the Americans. It's too late to revisit that decision. The frigates have got to be fixed and brought on-line as soon as possible.

Only we had invested more in our own capabilities and in particular in messenger RNA manufacturing capacity. And while we

can't wind back the clock, we can make sure we are equipped for the next pandemic and chart a path to becoming a future vaccine-manufacturing hub for the Asia-Pacific region; if annual boosters are required this will become a major industry.

Traditional vaccines inject a harmless version of a virus, or a viral protein, into our bodies to trigger an immune response that protects against the actual virus. In contrast, mRNA vaccines essentially instruct our cells how to make a viral protein that triggers the immune response.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine — a traditional viral vector vaccine — uses a harmless carrier virus encoding a coronavirus protein. It has high manufacturing costs as it requires very large

scale cell cultures to make the modified viral particles. These need to get into the nucleus of cells, which may make them less effective.

But mRNA vaccines look like they'll be cheaper and more effective. And it should be possible to package one RNA after another to immunise individuals against a series of different threats.

One can roll these out since RNA molecules are essentially all the same, they're all negatively charged strings of bases — A, C, G and U. You can make any different RNA just by changing the order of the letters. If you can synthesize, package and deliver one RNA, you can deliver any RNA.

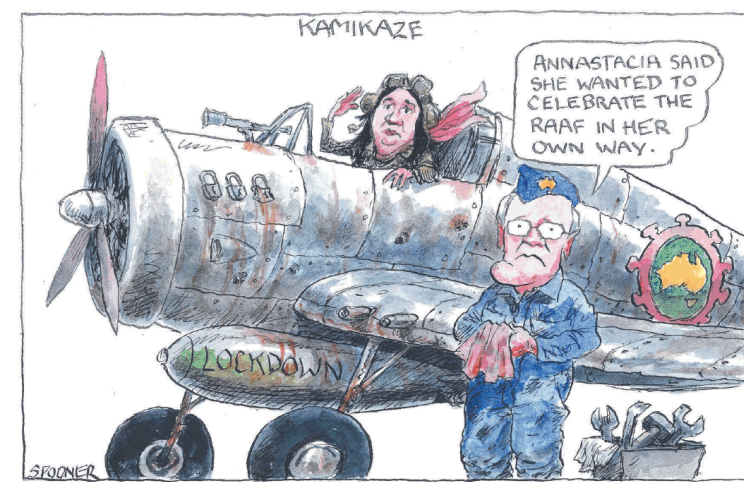
In contrast, viral proteins are all different — they all have different shapes and charge, some fold nicely, others stick together in a mess.

And while harmless carrier viruses work, it's not clear that you can keep using the same carriers again and again. In short, making vaccines with RNA is a great idea.

But it wasn't easy. You can't just inject a wad of RNA. The human body sees RNA as foreign and mounts a shock response.

You have to be careful about designing the RNA, though. Researchers found that if instead of using the normal building blocks of RNA, they used a chemical analog called pseudouridine, and if

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 sinned his government: too many lightning bolts from the heavens.

Keeping his ranks stocked with the hall, the lame and the tame was not one of them. Morrison's reluctance to sack, not surprise, MPs in strife, no matter the offence, 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 Berejiklian and John Barilaro did over the scandalous behaviour of Michael Johnson, who has resigned from the NSW parliament, then

gird 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 foolhead.

Arguing he's simply doing his fute. Ask Julia Gillard how that works 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 clung to him for dear life.

Papered over in all the romance of her misogyny speech in parliament is the fact she made it to defend Liberal Pat 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 misogynistic text messages to a young man, prompting two independent 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, whose Labor figures now concede could pose a bigger threat than Morrison.

That thought will no doubt increase Morrison's span of 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 relay more of the stopped stuffing up, say by not calling Morrison Payne the prime minister for women. It was too cute by half, serving him open to ridicule as the prime minister for men.

Thanks to a penchant for sloaneering, Morrison cheapened

the importance of what he was doing to enhance Payne's role, promote other women, establish a new taskforce designed to give them a stronger voice inside the government and of course to surround himself with a band of Amazon 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 prove himself in an important

role that is not always given to women. He could do what Peter Dutton 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 getting the economy back on its feet. If he stabilises, he should think seriously about an election sooner rather than later.

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