

No surprise Libs are on life support after malignant Morrison years

By Belinda Jones

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(Cartoon by Mark David | @MDavidCartoons)

For many Liberal Party members, guilt by association with the Morrison years will forever remain a dead weight they must lug around with them for the remainder of their political careers, writes [Belinda Jones](#).

THE LIBERAL Party is facing an existential crisis, though members won't admit that publicly. Or perhaps even privately.

In Victoria, the so-called "[moderate](#)" Liberal, [John Pesutto](#), has just regained the seat of Hawthorn from Labor's [John Kennedy](#) and has been [elected](#) Victorian Liberal Party leader.

Pesutto formerly held the traditionally blue-ribbon seat from 2014-2018 and infamously learned he'd lost it while live [on air](#) in 2018 after Labor's landslide victory.

In that state election campaign, ex-Institute of Public Affairs ([IPA](#)) Pesutto was embroiled in the "[African gangs](#)" saga, along with Peter Dutton, in a failed attempt to sway voters with racist stereotypes that will forever remain in every Google search connected to Pesutto or Dutton.

Pesutto prosecuted the "gang" argument with characteristic Liberal gusto, saying in December 2017 that there was an

"... over-representation in gang-related violence in Victoria..."

Except there wasn't. The facts did not support the Liberal rhetoric and as a [consequence](#), the voters didn't support Pesutto either. He was turfed. Perhaps that was a blessing in disguise, in hindsight, because he wasn't linked throughout the pandemic to the conga line of Liberal [miscreants](#), whingers, cooks and recalcitrants, state or federal, all jostling for attention.

Though his words and actions cannot be erased from the minds of astute voters or the echelons of cyberspace, Pesutto was suitably publicly divorced from the Liberal Party shenanigans of the Morrison years federally and the [Guy/O'Brien](#)/Guy years at the Victorian state level, escaping any overt guilt by association.

Another thing that saved Pesutto's bacon was the graceful way he handled his humiliating 2018 defeat live on air. Grace is a quality rarely found in the Liberal Party, particularly the Victorian Liberal

Party and it is a quality that Pesutto displayed that November night in 2018. An absence of four years gave him just enough clean air to [win](#) the seat of Hawthorn back on the narrowest of margins and, subsequently, the Liberal leadership.

For many Liberal Party members in the federal sphere, guilt by association with the Morrison years will forever remain a dead weight they must lug around with them constantly for the remainder of their political careers.

None more so than Opposition Leader [Peter Dutton](#) and Deputy Opposition Leader [Sussan Ley](#). Dutton did [Scott Morrison's](#) bidding on immigration and border security, a role he relished and took obvious delight in [punching down](#) on the most vulnerable of people.

Similarly, Ley took obvious delight in punishing our vulnerable environment in her role as Environment Minister, culminating in accusations of an attempt to [hide a damning report](#) on the environment from voters.

Now, neither of these leaders can get any clean air, they are forever inextricably linked to Scott Morrison and seem happy to be so. Every Google search highlights their links with the catastrophic failures of Morrison and the Coalition Government he led from August 2018 to May 2022.

As more and more dirt on Morrison emerges – usually through his own slip-ups about long-forgotten lies or inquiries into events during his years of government – it illustrates the [power Morrison sought](#) to grant himself and the impotence of his colleagues to stop him.

Those same colleagues cannot claim now to have the strength to lead Australia when they didn't even have the strength to thwart Morrison's direct [assault on our democracy](#). No one stood up to Morrison, not Dutton, not Ley — and so they created a monster they could not control and still can't.

They appear to have no power over Morrison. They cannot and will not force him to go — in fact, after

the recent [censure motion](#), his Coalition colleagues publicly supported him despite his obvious presence being catastrophically detrimental to the well-being of the Federal Coalition.

And, while ever Morrison remains on the Opposition back bench, he will remain a thorn in the side of any leader, like a "[menacing wallpaper](#)".

Morrison doesn't have the moral fortitude to leave politics of his own volition and allow his party to rebuild because he refuses to believe he was anything less than perfect, preferring to defiantly defend his poor performance as PM at every opportunity — even in [response to a censure](#) on the floor of Parliament. There is no low to which the man will not stoop in his vainglorious attention-seeking behaviour.

Meanwhile, Dutton must simply wait until Morrison chooses to leave politics as he tries to [soften his image](#) once again — this week with a scary, dystopian picture doing the rounds, proving Dutton is not the most photogenic Coalition politician.

Nine helps out by painting a smile on a cadaver. <https://t.co/vIC9JbGX5P>

— marquelawyers (@marquelawyers)
[December 3, 2022](#)

Australian mainstream media has tried several times over the years to soften Dutton's image with puff pieces including the yet-to-be-surpassed classic, '[My husband is not a monster](#)' but all to no avail — Dutton [remains as unpopular](#) as ever.

Peter Dutton has cultivated his "tough cop" image very carefully over the years, but now it doesn't work for him. He was the enforcer of Morrison's toughest policies. Dutton carried the former PM's luggage for him for years so Morrison didn't get have to get his hands dirty. Morrison gets off "Scott-free" and now Dutton can't clean off the lingering stink.

While Dutton waits for Morrison to move on, he is haemorrhaging what little political capital the Coalition has left.

Dutton doesn't have stylists or professional photographers in-toe as Morrison did. Nor does he have a fake "[daggy dad](#)" image to promote himself as Morrison did — and even if he did, the photo-op-weary public wouldn't fall for it twice.

It's difficult to see how Dutton can exorcise the demon that is Morrison from the Coalition's political landscape when he seems to be a leader in name only who struggles with the most basic [questions](#) in Question Time. Put simply, Dutton has turned out to be a dud.

Perhaps, John Pesutto fluked it but there's also the chance he has discovered the winning formula for how a Liberal phoenix can rise from the ashes in the 21st Century. A spell on the sidelines may do more for a political career than playing every game and embroiling oneself with every political scrapper who happens to be a member of the Coalition's "[broad church](#)".

Pesutto's friend and wannabee PM, [Josh Frydenberg](#), will be watching on with interest. However, according to Dr [Monique Ryan](#)'s version of events, Frydenberg [doesn't share](#) the grace that Pesutto exhibited in the face of a humiliating and very public defeat.

Frydenberg doesn't like losing and [doesn't do it well](#). When primary votes are in the 30s and "safe seats" now sit on one to two per cent margins, then grace and humility in the face of defeat is a skill all politicians must possess because the internet has a long memory, even if they don't.

Only time will tell if Dutton is to Frydenberg what Guy and O'Brien were to Pesutto, but it's looking unlikely.

Dutton failed to capitalise on the censure motion and censure Morrison internally, instead capitulating to the Member for Cook and his "[legacy](#)" in an embarrassing public display, further and forever entwining his own legacy with that of Morrison's. Dutton had this one unique opportunity and he blew it.

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