

For whom was Morrison acting?

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Lead Editorial

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Scott Morrison giving a “nothing to see here” press conference on 17 August. Photo: Screenshot

The sensational revelation that as Prime Minister, Scott Morrison secretly appointed himself Minister in five other portfolios with existing Ministers, including Health, Finance, Treasury, Home Affairs, and Resources, has rocked Australian politics.

This is a scandal that epitomises the depths to which politics has sunk, with Morrison’s tenure as leader the lowest level so far. Of the five portfolios, only Health Minister Greg Hunt knew he had done it; apparently the other Ministers had no idea, or at least that’s what they now claim. Department heads claim to have been in the dark, as does ASIO, believe it or not (but don’t worry: while ASIO may not know what our PM is doing, they are on the job protecting us from peace with China). The only person who did know was the Governor-General, so, if history is any guide, that would also mean Buckingham Palace would also have known, as the G-G keeps the Palace informed of everything.

Morrison’s justification for appointing himself a second Health Minister in 2020 was the COVID-19 outbreak, and the enormous, “god-like” powers the Health Minister wielded under the *Biosecurity Act*. According to the 15 August *New Daily*, Patrick Weller, an emeritus professor of politics at Griffith University who wrote the book on Cabinet government, rejected that justification, and said that “contingencies such as ministers falling sick would never have posed a problem and presented only minutes of immediate work”. But even if you accept the extenuating circumstances for Morrison giving himself control of the Health Department, it doesn’t explain any of the other portfolios and, especially, the secrecy.

One context for this scandal is the position in which successive Australian governments in recent years have been trapped—by their own ideology—between the growing volume of demands from an increasingly angry population for government to actually deliver for the people, and their neoliberal ideology which serves elite vested interests first and foremost. With the partial exception of true emergencies when governments scramble to address a crisis, delivering for the people has become a foreign concept for politicians of both major parties “of government”, as they like to describe themselves. Except the people have grown angry at governments for not solving the worsening economic problems that are the consequences of decades of neoliberalism, including debt, inflation and failing infrastructure and services. This is the major reason that Australia has had seven

governments since 2007. Morrison was arguably the worst of all, a soulless politician who pursued power for power's sake, even, as we now see, going to extreme constitutional lengths to ensure he had total control.

But for whom? It's a mistake to see this entirely in personal terms. A politician like Morrison serves powerful interests. Look at his years of protecting the banks from the Royal Commission. Look at his despicable mistreatment of Christine Holgate, which, apparently, happened when he was also Finance Minister, one of the two shareholder Ministers for Australia Post. Morrison's attack on Holgate was a deliberate act of bastardry which set off a chain reaction of chaos and dysfunction at Australia Post. As the Senate Inquiry achieved last year by the Licensed Post Office Group and Citizens Party proved, Christine Holgate was the obstacle to the agenda to privatise Australia Post. She'd also made enemies of the banks, by making them pay more and talking of a postal bank, and sources have revealed the bank CEOs would regularly call Morrison to complain about her. Christine Holgate was showing how a government entity could again serve the people, so he used his power to remove her, unlawfully—and all of his colleagues who are complaining about him today sat there like cowards and did nothing.

Morrison is now gone, but the interests he served aren't. That's the issue. Our fight, for policies like a postal "people's bank", is against vested interests and ideologies, to make government of, by, and for the people.

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