

The many faces of Scott Morrison — and the things that turn them off and on

The prime minister doesn't get angry all that often. But it's worth paying attention to the times when he does.



For public consumption, there are four Scott Morrisons. There's the daggy dad (how good is the daggy dad?); the serious leader (see agitprop photos of Scott-at-desk); the smarmy dismitter (reserved for parliament and the media); and, most rarely, righteous anger Scott.

We saw righteous anger Scott in full incandescence last week, calling a snap press conference in response to a tweet and expressing Australia's national outrage at a faked image depicting something which Australian special forces soldiers are actually accused of doing in Afghanistan. Scott, described by the official transcription service we also call mainstream media, was "visibly angry". Ooh.

Scott, a man of strong moral conviction, gets occasionally exercised to high emotion by truly dreadful things. It's instructive for all of us, since our leader sets the ethical tone, to reflect on the kinds of matters that do, or do not, invoke his moral rage.

The high (or low) point of outrage for Scott was, of course, the 2018 outbreak of needles in strawberries. That was so horrific that Scott made new laws to punish the "grubs" and "cowards" responsible.

In 2020, undeniably the worst year in living memory, Scott has actually remained mostly sanguine, getting righteously upset very few times. The Chinese tweet, obviously; the Maritime Union of Australia, whose go-slow industrial action in Sydney was — according to Scott — stranding 40 container ships at sea. The story was entirely untrue but Scott's anger looked genuine.

There was toilet paper panic buying, which made Scott really testy ("Stop it!" he admonished us). Journalists saying "bonk ban" provoked a similar prime ministerial dressing down, because the subject of ministers having sex with their staffers is very serious and should be talked about with serious words.

But the most "disgraceful" act of 2020, which "appalled and shocked" Scott to his core, was the revelation that Australia Post had given Cartier watches to four senior executives. Heads must, and did, roll over that national shame, despite the absence of illegality, corruption or even a policy breach.

As for the things that a casual observer would think might (but most definitely did not) have raised even a flicker of moral indignation in Scott's puritan heart this year... well, the list is quite long:

The bushfires (I don't hold a hose, mate)

Climate change's acceleration

The Great Barrier Reef's condition being declared "critical"

COVID-19

The Ruby Princess debacle, hotel quarantine failures (except in Victoria), or the 682 COVID deaths in federally regulated aged care

Black deaths in custody or the failure to "close the gap" yet again

Neo-Nazis on the rise

The aged care and disability services crises

The family and domestic violence crisis and the related deaths of 43 women this year

International students trapped here with no access to welfare support

Australians stuck overseas

The universities' death spiral

The near-death experience of the arts during the pandemic

Robodebt's \$1.2 billion black hole or the death and untold suffering caused by it

Sports rorts

Alan Tudge's long list of acts that make his ministerial position untenable

Endemic sexual harassment in institutional settings including parliament, ministerial offices and the High Court

Spending \$4000 an hour to fly private citizen Mathias Cormann around the world begging for the top OECD job

The Biloea family celebrating 1000 days in detention

Refugees generally, some of whom have been in detention for seven years now

Gladys Berejiklian's sudden self-reveal as a latter-day Lucrezia Borgia

Facilitation of money laundering on a grand scale by Westpac and Star Casinos

The small matter of war crimes allegedly committed by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan.

In fairness, unlike almost all of the above, Scott did not ignore the alleged war crimes, calling them “disturbing and distressing”. But not quite “repugnant” and “utterly outrageous”, like the Chinese tweet. And, unlike the apology Scott demanded from China, there was no prime ministerial call for anything in response to the war crimes revelations apart from his insistence that the armed forces chief back down from his initial call to strip citations from an entire army unit. On that last suggestion, Scott was quite upset too. The unfairness, you know.

My list, no doubt, is incomplete. It’s been a very big year, after all. Our leader has been busy, at least at Bunnings.

It is reasonable to expect him to ration his emotions and, more importantly, choose judiciously when to bring his moral authority to bear on issues of the day and signal to us when we, too, should be upset.

Good to be reminded, then. Cartier watches and a tweet.

Where should the prime minister be directing his anger? Let us know your thoughts by writing to letters@crikey.com.au. Please include your full name to be considered for publication in Crikey’s Your Say section

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