

Australian prime minister's role in sports pork-barrelling intensifies political crisis

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Reports that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's own office orchestrated the use of a sports grant program to illegally hand out cash to try to secure key seats in last May's election have deepened the crisis engulfing the Liberal-National Coalition government and the entire political establishment.

Less than nine months after barely surviving the May 2019 poll, Morrison's government is widely reviled and beset by internal rifts. Corporate media editorials and commentators are calling into question its ability to remain in office or Morrison's survival as prime minister, let alone to carry through the brutal agenda required by the financial elite.

Far from calling for the government's ousting, however, the official opposition Labor Party is urging Morrison to sack the minister selected as a scapegoat for the affair—deputy National Party leader Senator Bridget McKenzie.

It is now clear that Morrison's staff and the Liberal Party headquarters ran the pork-barrelling operation—not McKenzie, who was then the sports minister—and that Morrison's cabinet ticked off on the unlawful handouts. The revelations, made by “sources” within the government itself, have made a mockery of any move to force McKenzie to resign in order to save the government.

“Two of Scott Morrison's senior staffers were involved in handling funding applications under the \$100 million community sports grants program and engaging with embattled Nationals deputy leader Bridget McKenzie,” the *Weekend Australian* reported.

This places the scandal, and widespread public outrage it has caused, directly at the feet of Morrison and the government as a whole, which is already hated, not least because of its contemptuous response to the country's bushfire catastrophe and underlying climate change disaster.

The “sports rorts” affair first erupted on January 15 when the Australian National Audit Office issued a detailed 72-page report documenting the extraordinary and blatant extent to which the government devised and exploited the \$100 million program to allocate money to electorates it

designated as “marginal” and “targeted” as last May's election loomed.

The audit office, traditionally regarded as the authoritative monitor of government spending, declared that the entire scheme was tainted by “distributional bias.” It said McKenzie's office handed out much-publicised grants to local sports clubs, overturning official Sports Australia recommendations in hundreds of cases, and without any legal authority.

Often-affluent clubs in seats targeted by the Liberal Party received maximum grants of \$500,000, while seriously under-resourced clubs in working-class areas—classified as “safe” Labor Party seats—received nothing after their volunteer members spent long hours working on applications.

The *Weekend Australian's* contributing editor Peter Van Onselen, a former Coalition staff member himself, reported: “The decisions of where and how to allocate the sports grants in the way the Auditor-General said was against the guidelines (not to mention deeply political) were made from within the political office of the Prime Minister. Not by the sports minister.

“That's right; Morrison's senior adviser for infrastructure and sport, a former Nationals staff member, no less, was point man on the political divvying up of the grants. He was working closely with campaign strategists inside the Prime Minister's office and the federal Liberal Party secretariat before presenting the allocations to McKenzie as a neatly wrapped-up final product. After which cabinet ticked and flicked the winning applications through to the implementation stage.”

Van Onselen added ominously: “Maybe the Prime Minister wasn't personally involved. We can't be sure. My sources haven't divulged that. Perhaps, even though Morrison is a former state party director who ran campaigns, he stayed out of this pork-barrelling process.”

This suggested that if Morrison—as had been urged, and confidently predicted, by some corporate media platforms—forced McKenzie to quit, there could be

retaliation from her and the National Party. That could entail further leaks and revelations about Morrison's personal hand in desperately trying to essentially buy votes to enable his unpopular government to scrape back into office.

After initially defiantly backing McKenzie and the "successful" sports grants scheme, Morrison suddenly shifted his ground last week. He announced that, several days earlier, he had asked Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet secretary Philip Gaetjens—Morrison's former personal chief of staff—to investigate and determine whether McKenzie's actions breached "ministerial standards."

The purported investigation was a transparent bid, entrusted to a reliable insider, to find a means to remove McKenzie in order to rescue the government. Editorials in the *Australian Financial Review* and various Murdoch newspapers had declared that McKenzie "had to go" for the sake of the government's survival.

Morrison seized on media revelations that McKenzie had given money to a shooting club that had granted her free membership. Ludicrously, he claimed that this issue was "very, very different" to the broader controversy surrounding the grants scheme.

In reality, the apparent ministerial conflict of interest over the \$36,000 given to the Wangaratta Clay Target Club was just one of a constant drip feed of stories published in the media about the extent of the political manipulation of the scheme.

Among the examples was a \$500,000 grant, just weeks before the election, to Adelaide's Old Collegians Rugby Union Club, in a government-held "marginal" seat. The grant was for facilities including new female change rooms, despite the club not fielding a women's team since 2018—when its whole female team quit the club accusing it of sexism.

Another report showed that the minister's office insisted that nine new or amended grant applications be permitted well after the application deadline had passed, despite Sports Australia warning that this was "not appropriate." All nine applications secured funding, even though Sports Australia also objected that eight lacked the "high merit" required by the official criteria.

Photos have appeared showing scores of beaming Coalition ministers, members of parliament or election candidates posing for media photos handing over giant-sized novelty cheques to local clubs.

It has also emerged that Morrison's cabinet twice approved an expansion of the scheme as the election neared. The May 2018 budget announced \$30 million for the program but after Morrison ousted Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister, the mid-year economic review in December 2018 allocated another \$30.3 million for a second round of

grants. The April 2019 budget, just a month before the election, set aside another \$42.5 million for a third round.

In that third round, the "bias" was even more blatant. Sports Australia's recommendations were overturned in 73 percent of the decisions. Its warnings about the potential "risk" of these actions, undertaken without any rules or criteria, were dismissed.

A virtual civil war has broken out in the government. National Party leader Michael McCormack and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton have continued to stridently defend McKenzie. McCormack said she followed all the required processes and is doing an "outstanding job." Dutton, a leader of the Liberal Party's most right-wing faction, said: "We all make decisions in our portfolios. That is exactly what she has done."

But other unnamed government members, including National Party parliamentarians, have told media outlets they back a cabinet reshuffle to dump her.

Whichever way Morrison moves—either to sacrifice McKenzie or close ranks around her—the government's situation will only worsen. Already numbers of media commentators are drawing the conclusion that his government has lost any sense of legitimacy or capacity to rule.

The pork-barrelling affair has multiplied the popular hostility to the government over the ongoing bushfire calamity, which is intensifying an economic slump driven by trade war. The government also faces growing public opposition over its complicity in the US bid to extradite WikiLeaks founder and Australian citizen Julian Assange.

The Labor Party is doing everything it can to shore up the parliamentary order and appeal for big business support. Party leader Anthony Albanese has said McKenzie needs to resign or be sacked. With the Greens and other parties, Labor is planning to send the affair off to a Senate committee once parliament resumes next week.



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