**Poll Position**

**Katharine Murphy**
Political Editor at Guardian Australia

**Pete Lewis**Executive Director at Essential Media

*In conversation with*

**Ebony Bennett**
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**Ebony Bennett** [00:00:03] Good day, everyone, I'm Ebony Bennett, deputy director at the Australia Institute, and welcome to Poll Position The Fortnightly Show, where we give you the inside scoop on the latest results from the Guardian essential poll. I'd like to begin by acknowledging that Canberra is Ngunnawal and Ngambri country and pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge that sovereignty was never stated and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. The Australia Institute does do webinars at various days and times, so please head on over to Australia Institute dot org dot a--you to find all the upcoming webinar dates. Next week, we'll be speaking to our chief economist Richard Denniss for the launch of his new book Big The Role of the State in the Modern Economy, so I hope you can join us for that. Just a few quick Zoom housekeeping matters to keep things running smoothly today. If you hover over the bottom of your screen, you should be able to see a Q&A box where you can type in questions for our panel. It should also be able to upvote questions from other people and make comments on the questions as well a reminder to please keep things civil and on topic in the chat, or will have to boot you out. And finally, a reminder that this is a live event and it is being recorded. You'll be able to find that up on our website later this afternoon. I want to welcome our regular guests. Katharine Murphy, political editor of Guardian Australia, Pete Lewis, executive director at Essential Media, and his colleague John Remington from Essential as well. And don't forget to head on over to Guardian Australia or to essential for all the latest polling results and analysis. So last fortnight we covered the fact that some had not exactly gone as the Prime Minister Scott Morrison had hoped it would, and that rather than hot summer of freedom, people were unable to find rat test. Though a massive lines for PCR tests, supermarket shelves were empty and many other problems. And now Parliament is back today and the prime minister wants the focus to be on the future. He wants us to be talking about the fact that they're aiming for unemployment numbers with a three in front of it. He talked at the National Press Club about up to $800 in bonus payments for aged care workers, and Katherine Murphy herself asked the prime minister about the deaths and outbreaks in aged care this year. And I do want to come back to that in just a second. But Katharine, the prime minister, was confronted with not one but two separate colleagues calling him a liar. One, anonymously, who also to boot thought he was a complete psycho and the other is his own deputy, PM Barnaby Joyce. He's already apologised for calling him a hypocrite and a liar. One of my favourite shows justified the character on there that says, Put it like this if you're in first grade and you bit a kid every week, you'd start to think of him as a biter. Is that how we're starting to think of the Prime Minister, Katharine?

**Katharine Murphy** [00:02:55] I don't. I don't look at, you know, I love you, but I do not want to think of the prime minister as a biter in any form. I think that several bridges too far. So let's step back from the abyss there and don't think about it with those terms. But look, your point is absolutely sound. Your point is that it's been, you know, a very difficult summer for the government. And then the sort of return to normal parliamentary and political business after the summer has been equally fraught for all of the reasons that you've outlined, including the free character assessments of the prime minister by the deputy prime minister and an unnamed cabinet minister. And and also we sort of as we as we're joining you today, obviously, parliament is back. MPs are back marshalling down on the front forecourt court is a very large protest of people who are opposed to vaccination mandates. There is this sort of sense of the government being encircled at this point in time that it's sort of that it's difficult to land a plane line or a plane thought about anything, as I've said a minute ago. The prime minister's current objective is to pivot away from the pandemic, which is fraught now for the government to campaign on and sort of reorient the debate in the economy and and also set up this election debate that we are the safe alternative. And if you change the government, that means risk. But the government is sort of having trouble just kind of steadying pivoting and and sort of shaping the conversation in a new direction. You know, it's so it's yeah. Anyway, it's sort of it's it's a fascinating set of conundrums that the prime minister faces just at the moment.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:04:56] It surely is, and I wanted to come to the polling quite shortly, but to kick us off. I guess you guys have made a real point with the Guardian essential poll not to follow the horse race as closely only publishing kind of quarterly where all that is up to, but that's set to change because we're much closer to the election. Do you want to just take us through before we dive into the figures that shift?

**Peter Lewis** [00:05:22] Yes. So maybe the horse race has now begun. Seriously, look, we took stock after the last election, and the performance of all the polls in may be providing a bit of a false lodestar, particularly for the progressive side of politics. That Labor was ahead and going to win because it was 52, 48 or 51 49. Where we look back over the way that we portrayed figures through the course of the last political cycle, we recognise that those numbers were never accurate, not because our weighting was out, but because there's eight to 10 per cent of the population that when you ask them, say, I don't know, even though they're the ones that actually have to vote at the end of the day. So we made the decision talking with Katharine and Lenore about a way to do it better. We invented what we like to call Toupee Plus and the Plus is the undecided because our insight was what we'd done by taking them out of the sample was we were actually disenfranchising the disengaged. So to put them back in the picture changes the way you look at it and we'll go to our polling numbers in a sec. And the other thing we said was that we would only release sets of data in three month blocks. So rather than looking, oh, it's moved one per cent. What does that mean, Simon Benson? We actually sort of sit there and have a look at the movement because there is there is a margin of error. There is movement of two to three per cent, which is the static in any poll. So as you'll see today, our polls a little bit different to where Newspoll has been running. But that's not a bad thing that just shows the numbers are noisy. We, if we want to go through, we will, but I guess, I guess to read off that conversation. So we are going to continue to report on that eight per cent middle, the undecided and what that means to TPP because it gives us a better view of what's happening. And secondly, we are now going to release it every fortnight. But Murphy and I are determined that that won't be the primary narrative. We are not going to be fixating about one or two per cent movements week on week. We are still going to focus on the bigger, contextual questions. And I guess that's the final point of this change in our approach to polling. It's allowed us because we've had the horse race out of the front of our view. We've focussed on other indicators like handling of COVID, which are much more, you know, it is a real measure of something happening now rather than a hypothetical intention to act in a particular way in a future whose timeline is yet to be determined. Yeah, I don't said these are our numbers. What we have got is a pretty close race. 47 seven TPP plus to Labor 46 TPP plus two the coalition. Eight percent undecided. So rather than saying Labour's ahead, we're in the home straight and they're pretty close and the undecided voters are going to determine the election much as they always do. Now, if we put out this week ago or the previous cycle, Labor was a little bit further ahead, but again within the margin of error. So I don't think any of the excuse thoughts, you could sort of break it up a bit. But you know, it's easy to fall into saying a poll like the Newspoll fifty six point forty four, was it in, say, all over Red Rover? This says no. There is still a contest here, and incumbency is incredibly valuable. So this is the same slide on a different thing with the time frame. So you can say a week ago you would have said 5:43 with seven per cent now and we would have been saying, Oh, we're a bit like Newspoll, but you know, that's the movement made a neck and neck. Yeah, a little bit ahead. What?

**Ebony Bennett** [00:09:26] Is there anything that you would comment on in that one, Pete that stuck out to you?

**Peter Lewis** [00:09:31] Well, just the narrowing on all of it now. So you would look at that and go, Oh, that means the Coalition's been doing better in the last two weeks. And then you look at the real world and you go, Ah, that's not what's going on. So the only point at which these numbers have a degree of resonance is that if you go to the performance of the handling of COVID, which is one more down the line, which actually says, and I think this is probably more the point, and this is this is probably the take out for the audience today who are very engaged in politics and wants to know who was the phantom text. Most people are living their life through their interaction with the coronavirus. And there has been an uptick of about five percent in people saying the government's been doing either a very good or a quite good job in the last fortnight. To me, that says that the log jams on rats and the logjams on boosters are beginning to clear. So the continent that isn't involved in politics that hate, it's not out of the government's handling, but it's a little bit better than it was.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:10:42] Katharine, what's your observation here of the latest results?

**Katharine Murphy** [00:10:46] Yeah. Well, look, as Pete has said, we our data is is different to where needs poll and I think the Morgan survey are at the present time. I think we consistently over the last 12 months, even though we haven't been highlighting the dreaded horse race, have been our numbers have been slightly more favourable to the coalition than some of the other surveys in terms of, you know, without kind of stubbing our toe on the margin of error movements, which is half the problem is said. I mean, I think the value of having a bunch of other questions is is interpretation that we do see that that uptick in, well, look over over the summer if we step back over the summer. Obviously, people's view of the of the government's handling of the pandemic, both federal and their state government deteriorated over the summer. That shouldn't surprise anybody. That, you know, we all had Christmas breaks disturbed in different ways by the the upsurge in cases and serious infections and tragically, deaths. We all know the context. So government sort of went on a slide basically over December and January, as Pete says, with sort of some of the some of the bottlenecks that were really making people very frustrated, which is like the absence of sort of timely testing, not being able to get a booster booking for a booster for several weeks, whatever you whatever you sort of crunch point was, some of those things are starting to move through the system. So, you know, if we step back and and think about what MPs are telling me on both sides, government employees are of the view that they've had a kicking over the summer and absolutely kicking over the summer from the voters, but that the backlash is soft. That is, you get that consistently not not sort of withstanding the craziness of the last, you know, as we sort of forget it, you know, whether or not the prime minister is or is in this, I go for a horrible, horrible person, whether he is or is not a hypocrite, a liar or whatever the character assessments say. It's most people. I find that it. Annoying. It distracts its noise and it distracts them from the issues that are immediately before them, which is am I going to stay alive? Am I going to have a job? And so anyway, government employees think that the kicking is soft. I mean, no one's triumphant. Everybody I've spoken to in the government thinks if an election was held today, they would lose it. But there is this feeling that the backlash is soft. And I have said in this forum more than once and I've written more than once since my return to work over the summer. This is a very difficult election for Labour to win. If this is a standard election cycle where there's not a massive movement either way, where people at sort of a bit rather than definitive. This is a really difficult election for Labour to win because a lot has got to go right for the Labour Party in quite different parts of the country. So it's certainly not impossible. But but if I were, I would rather I would rather be the coalition than Labour at this point in time. Notwithstanding the fact that the government has had a had a very bad summer and and and the the prelude to these parliamentary sitting weeks is been terrible, there's no other word for it.

**Peter Lewis** [00:14:42] Can I just throw one more thing in that I picked up watching the press club before the text bombs? Morrison was using this interesting formulation. It was very much the language of way we're moving forward. We've done a great job and I reckon to that kicking point, people felt really bad over summer that they were missing things. And so I think he's trying to make the way we feel about where we're up to a proxy for the way the government is. And if he can get through the next few months and we feel better about where we're going than we voting for us is voting for him. And I think that's where he's trying to get to that. We've done we've gone through a tough couple of years. We're moving on to the other side and we're going to do this together. I think it's brazen, but I think it's potentially effective as well.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:15:34] Yeah. Before we go back to the slides, Katharine, I did want to come back to your question at the press club before. I'm not sure if it's before or after the text bombs were dropped.

**Katharine Murphy** [00:15:45] Immediately afterwards.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:15:46] That's right. It struck me, as you know, one of the key policy issues that really went wrong for the government over summer. And it's not like you can just import a bunch of nurses like you can a truckload of of rat tests and masks and things. Were you satisfied with the response that you got from the prime minister and how much of a problem do you think the unfolding crisis in aged care? We've seen him just, you know, call in the military after ruling that out. So clearly they are worried about it.

**Katharine Murphy** [00:16:21] Yes, they are worried about it. Look, was I satisfied with the answer? No. And I think this is a very live and pressing issue. The thing about the pandemic in aged care is that the pandemic hasn't sort of caused the problems in aged care. The problems were pre-existing. What the pandemic has done is accelerate the problems in a really dramatic way. So look, obviously it's it's complicated. It's difficult. If if Booster Crews comes through aged care facilities and residents don't want their boosters, then Scott Morrison is quite correct to say, Well, what do we do? I mean, do we do we force people to have them? Obviously, we can't do that. But the thing is, you know, we've we've had a spotlight over the aged care sector for much of the last two years. We had a big response in the budget last year's budget, a lot more money for the sector over over a long period of time. What has been absent from the government's position at this point is a workforce strategy, and you cannot fix the problems in the caring economy without a workforce strategy. It's just not possible. So look, we need to be clear in terms of aged care, the Commonwealth funds and regulates the aged care sector. What is happening in residential aged care is, is, is the is the Commonwealth's problem. It's not some random rando passer bys problem. It's the Commonwealth's problem. We've had disproportionate deaths in the first wave of COVID in nursing homes because they were so ill prepared. Now, in the al-Muqrin summer, we've had another wave of cases and we've got this exacerbated by workforces. Not being there is not enough people basically to care for people properly, then then people in a situation in residential aged care where they basically having to stay in their rooms to avoid for infection control purposes because there aren't sufficient people present with them to be able to manage their circumstances better. So I think intriguingly, at the press club, the prime minister did point to the government working on a workforce strategy in aged care. He did mention that in passing, and we really do need to see that because that that really is. I mean, it's not the key to all mythologies. There's lots of different problems, but without a proper workforce strategy. And that means making caring a career that people want to consider. I guess it's it's what you pay people. It's how you train them. It's their quality of work. Without that, we're not going to get a fix in in a sector that we will all have some dealings with as we move through life and appropriately. We know, of course, the population's ageing. This is a real this isn't a like 10 years, 10 years away problem. This is a now problem. Yeah, pandemic is held a massive lantern over that. And yes, it was disappointed in that session to sort of, you know, have the text bombs ball mean when there's sort of real and pressing issues that I think probably more voters care about. But I mean, that's the nature of politics, isn't it?

**Ebony Bennett** [00:19:53] It is. And just reflecting on that issue of aged care, that's been a huge problem over time and and identified by the royal commission, as you said in that workforce section of what needs to change. Part of that, what we've been hearing about this week is that those two kind of $400 or up to $400 payments as a bonus are just not enough for a sector that is chronically underpaid, where even the aged care providers have more or less making the case. But the government hasn't even made a submission yet to to that case that the nurses union and others have brought to increase the pay for aged care workers. So, yeah, a bit of a drop in the bucket there, but I'm sure they're hoping it's enough to like.

**Peter Lewis** [00:20:40] Ebony I thought Albo's intervention on the aged care issue is interesting this week and I thought it was quite a nice framing. We used to call these nursing homes because there were nurses that become aged care facilities, which is almost a corporate formulation that reflects the the work that really John Howard did back when he was in power to take something that was effectively part of the public system into a marketplace. And we're kind of now trying to reverse engineer a series of safeguards around on what's effectively become a deregulated marketplace. But I thought in terms of having something that will really resonate and cut through the idea of nurses in every nursing home is is a really good place to start.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:21:27] Yeah. So let's head back to our polling results here. Hmm.

**Peter Lewis** [00:21:33] And can I just say people want to play at home there's a lot more data on our website. Essentialreport.com.au and you can play around with all these figures and get the trend lines. The one we're looking at here just sort of reinforces that everyone's feeling a little bit better than they did a couple of weeks ago because the federal government response in each state is up. And if you go to the next slide in most states, it's up as well, except one particular to particular states, one particular state on the other side of Australia, where

**Ebony Bennett** [00:22:07] Western Australia to be specific.

**Peter Lewis** [00:22:11] You know, the Stalin era endorsement of the glorious leader is dropped to only 64 percent. So there is a little bit of fatigue going in there. But if you look at South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales, there's been a bit of an uptick, although the story in Victoria not quite so positive for the incumbent either.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:22:38] Take us through this slide on uptake of vaccines and boosters,

**Peter Lewis** [00:22:42] I might defer to the greater mind of John Remington because he put this slide together, so I'm going to let John take us through this one.

**John Remington** [00:22:49] Yeah, on the left hand side, we've got our usual question of looking at the vaccine uptake that's shifted around. We've heard about another 10 percent of people who have got the booster in the past couple of weeks, so encouraging that that is continuing. So where we're sitting now is 46. Six percent of people are boosted with the surge. So you vaccinated with the booster dose, 43 percent double vaccinated, but not yet boosters. And then we've got a few small percentages who will be the still on the first dose or are refusing to get vaccinated for those people who haven't been boosted yet. What we then said was, Well, what? What is the reason for this? And for a lot of people, as you might expect, it's just because of the all the slower rollout last year and the the time frames that people are unable to get boosters until. I think it's three months in Victoria, similar in other states now as well. Similarly, after dark, twenty five percent just hang around to doing it yet. So there might be a potential threat that the booster rollout slows down as people have other priorities as lives continue and not what we do have down toward the bottom. There's that 11 percent of people who have had both the first two doses say they don't intend to get a third. Around that, that's around, I think about five percent of all people, the population, so again, a potential threat that the vaccine rollout could stall if people don't continue to get boosted once they have not had the double dose. Yeah, probably leads onto the next slide as well.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:24:29] I'll just do a quick recap. So that's only of the people who haven't yet received their first dose. That's a third who say it's too soon since they've had their second jab, a quarter who've booked but haven't been to get it yet. About one in five who haven't got round to making an appointment and about one in 10 of that smaller section of the population who don't intend to get a booster. And a little bit less for everyone left over fully vaccinated definition. What is it Pete?

**Peter Lewis** [00:25:04] This one's not quite so difficult for me, but this is this is relevant because what is going to be the definition of vaccination both in and out and across borders, but we've got a growing sense. So obviously a majority of those numbers that take a day three doses equals fully vaccinated in the minds of the majority now

**Ebony Bennett** [00:25:26] Not in the minds of many of the people honking around the streets of Canberra at the moment in Canberra.

**Katharine Murphy** [00:25:31] This is the point at, yeah, that we need to pick that up quickly, I think because we did see a very interesting little microcosm in this, this vaccine or fully vaccinated definition debate. Yesterday, the prime minister announced that the international borders would reopen to tourists and travellers in a in a couple of weeks. The definition allowing people to enter the country is you are vaccinated as if you've had two jabs. The whole debate domestically, which has been led by then Daniel Andrews, is basically if we sort of think about that, that slide that showed, you know, if we cut to the chase on the boosters right there just hasn't been the urgency about getting the boosters that there was in the initial vaccination programme. Obviously, people are moving through and methodical fashion, but there's just not that urgency and the premiers are concerned about their health systems thinking about a winter coming, coming at us, which will have a renewed COVID season, as well as a flu season because everybody is around and about, rather than being locked down for months on end. So the premiers assigned to Morrison, we really need the definition to be three three jabs because then that will that will focus the mind of Australians on what they need to do. It's a call to action, right? They need three jabs, not two. But the prime minister was at pains yesterday when he announced the opening of the borders to say No, no, no, no. The definition for entering the country permission from international visitors, that'll be two jets, not three. And even if we change the definition domestically, we're not going to change the definition for international travellers. And that, as you said a minute ago, had loops in my mind to the many people who are massing on the forecourt as as we speak on the webinar today. This protest has sort of been, you know, sitting on sitting at Scott Morrison's doorstep for the last week, and the government is concerned about this leakage of votes on their right flank. There are a bunch of people outside who are literally the living embodiment of that rusting off that's happening down there at the moment. And I think at least part of the prime minister's considerations, as well as health advice, I'm not suggesting it's all politics at all. And obviously, they all of these deliberations are tested in terms of health advice. But certainly there are. There's a feeling in the national cabinet that Morrison is dragging its heels a bit on this, on the three being the definition because of the folks down on the floor.

**Peter Lewis** [00:28:21] Yeah, which is critical to where the, you know, the Clive Palmer ads end up sending voters at the end of the day, isn't it likely we know what happened last time?

**Katharine Murphy** [00:28:33] Yeah, it all loops back.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:28:35] Yeah, yeah. Do you want to take us through these last couple of slides?

**Peter Lewis** [00:28:39] You might need to squint people, but again, if you're playing at home, go to a cinch report or got a year. So what we've started doing is a formulation on issues about whether an issue is going to make people more or less likely to vote for the government. And as you can see here on most things, is a net negative towards the government on key issues, but not overwhelmingly so. The majority are kind of in the middle. There made no difference to your voting intention. Where this gets interesting and again, I'll defer to John is when you look at both people that voted liberal in 2019 who say this issue makes them less likely to vote liberal and people that didn't vote liberal in 2019 who say this issue makes them more likely to vote liberal. So if you can hold that, so what we're interested in is liberal voters in 2019. Is there an issue that's going to push you away from the government and non-government voters? Is there an issue that's going to take you close to the government of set up that for you? Beautifully, John, do you want to make sense of what I just said?

[00:29:45] Once I do to help all of these numbers, I think key ones to focus on are the second one down in this in that list of the COVID 19 pandemic. Overall, that's a net 13 percent loss in voters for the government. That's a big one. The other two are the two down the bottom with the lowest push towards the coalition, that's climate change and the cost of living. So if you did vote Coalition in 2019 the ones are going to, mostly you're going to stick with where you voted. So we're looking at the differences are smaller, but these are where the negative differences are. And again, that's cost of living. So that's going to drive about four percent of coalition voters away from them. Climate change is driving around three percent away or net aware and all the rest are coalition voters are pretty happy and would get would continue to vote. So those are the two big where we're seeing an actual shift. If you didn't vote for the Coalition, to be honest from these issues that we've looked at, there's nothing really which is driving you towards them at this point. So from even economic management, where they are traditionally strong, there's nothing where people are really giving a ringing endorsement of the work that's done over four years as a reason to vote for them next time.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:31:05] Yeah, right. Pete, this one is a good one about the way people use social media. What prompted you to ask about this this fortnight?

**Peter Lewis** [00:31:18] Because it's my pet project, but also because, there's been over this summer an enquiry into online safety that's been running up, put up a bit about this in my Guardian column this week, which says in the fantasy world where there was a summer of freedom, this would be a really big deal now. And Morrison's been trying to build this narrative around keeping kids and women safe online for some time. People may remember the J-20 before he got Pollocks by Macron. He was going to give this global landmark speech on online safety in Australia, being a world leader. And so what he's been doing over the summer was set up as a series evidence from a whole bunch of victims and big photo ops. And I and my rate was he was setting up his pitch for re-election post-COVID as keeping us safe from COVID, safe from China and safe online. Now the interesting thing in these numbers, which I think have dropped off the screen, is that there is two thirds to 70 per cent support for something being done here. The question I ask in my column is, is this the right thing to be done? Because the work we do with the Centre for Responsible Technology is to talk about systemic change. And this is very much just a bit like the old version of crime where you just increased the penalty on a particular crime. Rather than trying to understand why the crimes being committed and intervene to stop that so people can read my column if they want. But I think there is still a huge appetite to regulate Big Tech. I just question whether the way this government is doing it is the right way to go.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:32:55] Very shortly, two questions from the audience. I can think we've got about eight hundred and fifty people on the line with us today. Thank you so much for joining us. Come to your questions in just a second. But Katharine, I did want to touch on paint, talk there about the prime minister trying to make social media a safer space for kids and women. But we've had a lot of talk in the last year about Parliament and whether or not it's a safe space for women. We know that for a lot of women it is not. And today that was not an apology, I believe, but an acknowledgement of some of the harm caused there. Can you just tell people a little bit about that?

**Katharine Murphy** [00:33:31] The issue will immediately before I came around to do this, I was in the chamber. I was in the House of Representatives for the statement of acknowledgement. It was an apology, but it did the the you know, the there was no doubt about that. Sorrow was expressed by all of the protagonists, some some with some with more grasp of the moment that they were in than others. I think it's fair to say yes, so that that's a really significant thing that's happened in the parliament at noon. If you've not been following the quick version is that the Jenkins review, which was the which looked into parliament's toxic workplace culture last year. One of the key recommendations was that political leaders stand up in the parliament and acknowledge the harm that has been perpetrated in this workplace over a long period of time and accept responsibility for not being an exemplar as as an employer for allowing this sort of combat culture of politics to determine people's lived experience in their workplaces. So the presiding officers basically read an agreed form of words on on the part of everybody in the parliament about about about that, then the prime minister and the opposition leader, Adam Bandt from the Greens, Zali Steggall from the crossbench, Barnaby Joyce from the National Party, all stood up one after the other and made their rhetorical reparations for what has occurred in this workplace. The prime minister certainly said sorry. He addressed Brittany Higgins, who was one of the people sitting up in the visitor's gallery, which is a small group of other liberal women's staffers who have done everything within their power over the last 12 months to get this issue on the agenda. But again, the prime minister was talking about generating a problem built up over generations. Yes, of course that's true, but really accepting responsibility for it is not talking about it. Is the problem built up over generations. It's it's a look in the mirror moment. Did I rise to the occasion when the occasion arrived? And yeah, anyway. But look, the yeah, and Brittany Higgins was clearly overcome. Sorry at oh gosh, all right. At a certain point in in the contributions, she became overwhelmed and and left the chamber. So huge day and moment for those women who have done it, who have been incredibly brave against the grain in their own cultures, but, you know, words are one thing, actions are another, right?

**Ebony Bennett** [00:36:42] Absolutely. And yeah, for for a lot of us who are just, you know, looking on. From outside, you can't even imagine kind of what a tumultuous year and a difficult year that has been and, you know, obviously for so many women who are still there in the building. Yeah, I think that would be quite quite a big moment. And let's hope it's the start of many, many more reforms to come. I'll go now to our questions from the audience. The first one is from Mel Smith. She asks, How does the panel think Scott Morrison will market himself leading up to the election and will we see a different image altogether? Katharine, I might come to you first, just reflecting. If we look at the press club address as what he's trying to project, what would you say

**Katharine Murphy** [00:37:38] if what would it what would be his tagline? I know the interesting thing about being an incumbent and this is what's different from the last election in the last election. Scott Morrison had been prime minister for, I don't know, five and a half minutes. He had the opportunity, I suppose, to construct this character of a prime minister that he projected very successfully to the electorate. You know, this sort of avuncular guy at the barbecue high achiever in a baseball cap basically was the product. When you're an incumbent, you can't conjure up a character for yourself. You are. You are weighted by your record. Even for the disengaged voters who determine the outcome of elections in Australia, that everybody will have an impression of the prime minister. Now that has been built up over the last three years in government. So he doesn't have the same flexibility to be two to sort of set a character and set a set a tagline for himself in this election. He's also will be weighted by the character assessments that have come from Emmanuel Macron. Barnaby Joyce writes, I mean, just fill that out, right? So anyway, look what the prime minister sort of answering the question with reference to today's data that David just again underscores that the pandemic is not an automatic vote winner for the government. People's concern about cost of living again underscores where the prime minister is going. He wants. He basically wants people to focus on the economy on, on, on new job creation, on the government being a safe pair of hands. What it takes, I will keep you safe from safe from the pandemic. Safe, safe from the side, from China. Safer, safe. I think that's basically it and one of the pandemics on the real down low. So look, yeah, it's a bit of a long winded answer to. But all I'm saying is he he has to be a prime minister in this campaign. He has to be a prime minister with a record. He has to basically appeal to people's concern about change. And by that, I mean a change of government, right? Like Anthony Albanese, the flip side of this question is Anthony Albanese. You know, it's two words in terms of how he's trying to present himself in those two words are safe change. Right? That's that is entirely what the the Labour leader is trying to do, what the prime minister is trying to do, particularly over the next few weeks and as we get into the campaign proper is to make people is to basically deconstruct this life change narrative that Labour's trying to put together and to appeal to the Coalition's strengths, which is security, economy. You know, times a serious anything can happen, guys. You don't want to change horses in midstream or whatever variant of that, that old campaign slogan we're going to get this time. That's where the prime minister is going to be. So it's not so much a character, which it absolutely was in 2019, but it's a set of propositions. It's a weighted set of propositions, basically, and that's where Morrison's going.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:40:49] Yeah. Back to my quote, at the beginning, I want to be clear, I wasn't accusing the prime minister of biting anyone, but more to the point, you know, if you've got the president of France and the Malcolm Turnbull, I think people can say there might be other things at play there in terms of calling a prime minister a liar. But when it comes out that a sitting member of your own cabinet, any deputy prime minister both have the same assessment, is that now solidified as his reputation? Or is there still room for him to change that?

**Peter Lewis** [00:41:20] I think Labor sees character and the connexion between character and performance as really central to their proposition for safe change. If we can, if we have a prime minister that the majority of the population does not trust to have the character to deal with the big challenges and that's going to affect their lives. That's a pretty compelling argument. For change. I don't know if any of you watch. Four Corners last night, I thought Shaun Nichols did a pretty good job of running a version of a focus group of swinging voters. And for that run, a lot of focus groups, nothing in there surprised me, and the two things that really struck me was the whole building of that persona of the daggy dad. But the family man who believes in God and supports the shocks for quite a few of those swing voters that's locked in. And so even the attacks are coming from this sympathetic construct and they haven't read like blind. They haven't read Sean Kelly. They haven't seen how the magician does his trick. So if you're just watching politics out of the corner of your eye, like lots of those people were in that report last night, you can see mistakes, but you've actually starting, believe it or not, with a sympathetic character now. I think the other interesting thing is if you stand back Morrison, the Bronte Sydney boys ragbag who discovered the sharks when he knocked the other guy that was trying to get Cork versus Alba, who grew up in social housing and campaigned for to save the lifelong rabbitohs. It's almost like Morrison's appropriated Alba's real personality now. What strikes me is this is what Kevin Rudd did to John Howard back in 2007, when he was running Safe Charge, he basically turned himself into a mini John Howard, but just a decade younger to remember the Labour strategist saying to me at the time, Yeah, I was working with the unions, the rights at work campaign, you remember, and their proposition was your jobs to get the mob to the edge of the cliff. Our job is to convince them it's not too big a fall once they go over the edge. That's the proposition of safe change. Now, I don't know if there's any greater wisdom in that, but I just think that. We should not underestimate. And then everyone that will go into the chat with the initials MSM, it's true. What now is going to be critical is when Morrison pulls off his baseball cap. Photo ops aiding a sausage, washing hair. Whether the media allows that to get to the people that are watching politics out of the corner, their eye unfiltered when he goes and announces money in liberal seats. Whether that gets a clean run or if it's questioned with the fact they're not moving on corruption. So I do think MSM will have a really important role in this campaign because Morrison is a master of MSM, and if the MSM is allowing itself to be used, then it will create a much better opportunity for Morrison to be re-elected. Is that too harsh on MSM, Katharine?

**Ebony Bennett** [00:44:38] I might just be to the people at home that it's talking about the mainstream media while.

**Peter Lewis** [00:44:42] Everyone in this in this forum knows what that means, because that's all they tweet about. Sorry, except Chris. Sorry, Chris.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:44:50] The next question that I've got is from Terrence Howard, who says, will the influence of state and territory premiers and chief ministers once the federal electioneering starts be running hot, will they be blamed for all the COVID stumbles or will they appear as heroes? Where do you think that will end? Katharine?

**Katharine Murphy** [00:45:10] More events, do you feel the events? Well, they moustache. Yeah, look, I don't know where that will with with that sort of it will be at the time were in the campaign, which is the sort of relevant marker of that. Obviously, the the state and territory leaders have been much more present for Australians over the last couple of years than than Scott Morrison has been. The people are much more likely to have a view about their premier or chief minister than they will have had at any point in my reporting, often prior to the pandemic. So obviously, how the state's travelling is relevant to how that the federal election ultimately ends. I think I think that they're all connected in a way the states look as a general proposition. The state leaders have had more approval from voters throughout the pandemic than Morrison, even when Morrison was on quite high approval levels. It's always been that the states and daylight because I think people watching how the pandemic played out and who held the power and who understood who was making the decisions, you know, understood the states in the federation were the people with the power. So look, all the states are off their highs. Even as we said this week, even Mark McGowan is out to get some sixty six per cent. I love you, Mark McGowan writing, Dear God, what next? So look, it's it's important in terms of the political contest in terms of the election. It is important for Morrison had the parity government is is going in in New South Wales. I think there's there's just sort of a. You know, there is a concern at the moment, obviously, that amongst the feds and in the state government that that's that's a bit of a vicious cycle that's not very helpful to the Coalition's re-election chances. But look, it's sort of it just depends what's ahead. You know, are we off the front page? Is there another variant around the corner? All of these things we don't yet know. So it's it's hard. I could just I can. I can. I can do a watercolour for you. Can I give you the definitive, definitive answer?

**Ebony Bennett** [00:47:36] And I did just want to ask, actually, both of you about there's been a lot of talk this week about clearing the decks and clearing off the barnacles, and the Australia Institute did some polling last week in the electorates of North Sydney and Wentworth that showed that there was huge support for restoring ABC funding and reversing cuts to the ABC long term funding arrangements and how important voters in those electorates think. The issue that ABC is to Australian democracy and the triennial funding agreement was up. We've seen an announcement on that this week where they didn't continue the indexation freeze. We've got the religious discrimination bill on the books. ICAC's seems to be off the agenda before the election, although the prime minister wasn't ruling it out. Just can you explain for people, Katharine? And then I'll come to you hate that phrase clearing off the barnacles like what's happening in parliament?

**Katharine Murphy** [00:48:38] Yeah, yeah. Well, look, it's sort of like you've sort of got to think about pre-election periods as a bunch of aeronautical engineers sitting there thinking about aerodynamics. It's about how to how to make the plane fly at its optimal level, I guess optimal efficiency. So anything that's dragging anything that's applying gravity in the wrong places gets lopped off. That's the that's the sort of concept that we're dealing with. So what the prime minister is trying to do in these remaining sitting weeks is sort of grind through business that is either helpful for the Coalition's re-election chances or dispatch business that is unhelpful for the Coalition's re-election chances. It's no more deeply meaningful than that. So yes, as it is the, you know, the government sort of neutralise the ABC funding issue, which is a bit of an issue in some of these contests in metropolitan areas between liberals and the teal independents. I think religious discrimination also plays into those contests. The prime minister's kind of wobbling along this line at the moment with religious discrimination, where he's sort of trying to appeal to enough of voters who may peel off on cultural issues, basically. So he's trying to say in those metro contests, we're going to look after gay kids for four conservatives who who think this religious discrimination bill should be an affirmative religious freedom bill as opposed to an anti-discrimination proposition. You know, he's he's sort of trying not to over over, over eg the the the sort of progressive element of this reform he's been emphasising in his press conference yesterday said what the religious discrimination bill would do is make sure that a Sikh family trying to get a rental property would not be discriminated against. So again, the prime minister is always talking to cohort cohorts of voters. You can see with that issue that that religious discrimination, if I hit it right, is is is very good for them in parts or in parts of western Sydney and parts of the country where there there are large migrant popular.

**Peter Lewis** [00:51:03] You look at the marriage equality map and the the electorates have voted now a number of Labor out of suburban election electorates.

**Katharine Murphy** [00:51:13] Exactly. It's, you know, with a lot of voters too, who who are devout, who had previous convictions. So again, the prime minister's wobbling along the path. Just if you're watching today, and we should be clear, obviously, when we're talking, if you're listening to us later that we're talking today. On Tuesday, the coalition party room has met this morning and hasn't yet endorsed the religious discrimination bill because there wasn't enough time that I think they're coming back for another session on that. So that's that's in the Bionicle kind of proposition. Then there's the integrity committee, as it says that the government's concerned about that or the lack of action on corruption and and integrity issues being weaponised against them in some of these inner city or heartland. Contests, so the prime minister, even though he's had three years to bring this proposition into the parliament, is now trying to say to his, Well, of course, we're not going to go to the election without having considered this is just entirely unclear when this bill may actually lob. So.

**Peter Lewis** [00:52:22] Can I just also say about barnacles that the risk is that if you allow them to remain on, they become part of a broader story. So if the attack on Morrison is correct and that he lies, then not delivering on election promises has extra potency because it's not just it becomes fact based. And if you think about what the Liberals did to Labour last time, they took all these measures that were designed that constraining tax concessions for wealthy people and turned it into higher taxes until it all came together in Labor will tax you to death so that the risk, I think on the coalition Saudis, all this unfinished business excites different populations, but brings them into a unified narrative that the guy can be trusted with Australia's future. So, you know, the ABC funding, I think, is a really conscious effort just to type some heat out of that place. This is a piece of about that pie as well.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:53:27] I was just going to say though, isn't it the ABC funding? I mean, Katharine, I think you've hit the nail on the head there with who the religious discrimination bill is kind of aimed at. But the ABC, the totally different kind of micro constituency as its as our integrity issues, although they're much more popular in a widespread manner. But that integrity, public broadcasting, climate change, those are all issues being focussed on by the independent candidates who are running in some of those safe liberal seats. Pete, how good of a job is the prime minister doing at threading that needle and micro broadcasting to those different audiences?

**Peter Lewis** [00:54:09] He risks the same problem that got Bill Shorten last election, which is you can no longer talk to disgraced markets and not have a shock. So yes, he can very tightly micro-target on social platforms and to regulate them properly. But apart from that, you can't. So the one thing I don't know if any of the community independents are going to win seats, but I do know that they've had a material impact on taking the hate. Pardon the pun out of the government's attacks on labour for having a more nuanced policy so that there there are some political contests where the actual end result isn't the only thing that happens. And I think that anyone on this call that's involved in community independents, you know, more power to happen because that is actually acting as a handbrake on the worst instincts of this government.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:55:05] And I would just say that if you're interested in that ABC polling that's available on the Australia Institute website and the Australia Institute's always has also done a huge amount of research on what a strong corruption watchdog would with real teeth would look like in terms of being properly resourced, independent have broad jurisdiction, the ability to hold public hearings. Many of those features in private member's bill, like the one put forward by Helen Haines. But you can find all that detail on Australia Institute, dot org, dot a--you and Katharine, I'll just come back to you. What kind of just before we wrap up kicking off parliament again for the yeah, it's actually not that many sitting weeks until the budget and then till the election. It's going to be a busy, a busy few months.

**Katharine Murphy** [00:55:56] Yeah. Well, we're sort of we're already very much in the mode of of of the election. I mean, you know, we can we can say the campaign hasn't been called, but we're well and truly campaigning. Everybody is campaigning. As you say, there's only a fraction of a handful of sitting weeks. I think I think the senators have an extraordinarily low number of sitting days. I think five or something like that because they've got estimates as well. So look, yeah, that the whole parliament knows it's on the clock right now in terms of settling these issues before the prime minister visits the Governor-General, and we are off after the budget on current indications. So yeah, there's definitely look, it's it's it's going to be a hell of a year.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:56:44] Yeah. And Pete, can you just remind everyone where they can find all the Guardian essential poll results?

**Peter Lewis** [00:56:51] Oh yes, I'll put it in the chart because I'm not sure if I'm giving the right address on this. I think it's essential report dot com that it might be dot org, but I'll put it might be just it's on any side, which is a John. It's dot com Doherty.

**John Remington** [00:57:03] Essentialreport.com.au

**Katharine Murphy** [00:57:06] Lewis you had one job

**Peter Lewis** [00:57:09] I know. Welcome to my world.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:57:12] Don't forget you can read about Katharine's analysis of the polling results up on Guardian Australia, along with Petes column up there. As I said, head on over to Australia Institute dot org dot au to sign up for future pole positions and webinars. Thank you so much, everyone

**Peter Lewis** [00:57:28] Oh an Eb I think we're becoming a guardian pod. This might end up in the August pod phase where we're in talks, so if it is, you guys will be the the live audience.

**Ebony Bennett** [00:57:38] Yes, I might be able to catch up with that later if you had to duck out for any reason. But as always, sorry that I can't get to everyone's questions. We're really looking forward to this year. It's an election year. There's a budget very soon, so there's going to be huge issues to get stuck into and we really appreciate your support for Poll position. Thanks so much, everyone. Thanks Katharine Murphy, Pete Lewis, John Remington. Thanks to the Australia Institute staff who make all of this happen. We'll see you again in a fortnight. And don't forget next week, you can tune in to hear Richard Denniss about his new book, Big The Role of the State in the Modern Economy. Thanks very much and take care of yourselves out there. Stay safe, and we'll see you soon. Bye.