Morrison, board shorts and the pub test

Jenna Price

What does it mean to be the prime minister for standards? I asked myself this after Prime Minister Scott Morrison said citizenship ceremonies needed to be run a particular way on a particular day. His proposed new rules will mean all councils must run citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day, or have their authority to run those ceremonies revoked, and a near unpolicable un-Australian dress code: no thongs, no board shorts.

“I’m making it really clear what my standards are and what my rules are,” he said.

His homily in Monday’s News Corp tabloids didn’t give me much more insight. In it, he says he took a summer holiday in the Shoalhaven, in the Federal seat of Gilmore, the most marginal Liberal seat in Australia. Morrison said he talked to locals on the NSW South Coast, particularly at the Shoalhaven Heads pub; and discovered Australians weren’t angry.

“It was a great reminder that there are quite a lot of us who actually think Australia is a pretty great place and we don’t really have too much time to be angry. We’re too busy dealing with our own challenges and getting on with life.”

Rebecca Huntley, social researcher at Circa and Australia’s guru on what makes us tick, says she’s surprised by Morrison’s position on Australia Day. “People want a national day and they like these moments but they don’t want to be torn apart by nationalism,” she says.

So I looked around to see if I could find further research which had gone beyond the gathering of anecdotes at a local watering hole. Shaun Ratcliff and Simon Jackman at the University of Sydney, with global survey company YouGov, set more than 1000 voters a number of propositions. Three in four voters say the government should spend more on infrastructure instead of cutting taxes; less than half believe the government should permit more fracking; 87 per cent believe that the differences between rich and poor have become too large; and nearly 90 per cent believe there should be subsidies for renewable energy sources. Nearly two thirds of Australians believe we should accept fewer immigrants (the question was designed to make respondents take a position).

It may be this last which causes Morrison to decide to police Australia Day when the rest of us are in our boardies, sarongs and thongs – he’s conflated citizenship ceremonies with an Australian anxiety about immigration, although by the time anyone’s gearing up to be brought into the fold, they’ve usually had the difference knocked out of them.

Ratcliff says: “Culture war issues appear to be more important for politicians than voters. While some are concerned by these matters, more are focused on issues that directly and significantly impact their quality of life, such as stagnant wages, job security and cost of living.” Also Medicare, as Morrison himself pointed out on Monday.

I talked to Colin Waller, who hosted the charity day at the Shoalhaven Heads pub. A former member of the national executive of the Australian Hotels Association, he promised me he’s not just a Liberal hack who hosted the prime minister as a political favour. When I asked him if he was a party member, he gave a little snort of derision and said he has also hosted Anthony Albanese and the Labor candidate for Gilmore, Fiona Phillips, recently.

Waller said he was surprised at the prime minister’s reception. Everyone was happy to meet him and talk to him. “Was it all Cronulla supporters? Was it because everyone is on holiday? I think our demographic might just be different. It was great to see there was respect,” he said. Waller says the PM passed the pub test.

Which doesn’t necessarily mean he will get their votes. As Waller said: “The polls are showing he’s got a lot of problems and he’s inherited a lot of issues.”

I asked Waller whether he would vote for the Liberal Party? “At this stage, I possibly would.” Possibly.

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