



English teacher Kerry Trott says staff and students' mindset were already more fragile at the start of 2020 due to the bushfires. Picture: Dion Georgopoulos

## Reconsidering the way we teach and learn in a 'sink or swim' year

From Page 25

Mrs Burton said teachers were noticing some students sink or swim during the online learning period.

This had brought new meaning to the theory of differentiated learning, she said - a concept that focuses on making content accessible for students of all abilities by adjusting teaching and learning activities to engage all students in the classroom (or online) simultaneously.

Ms Fenn said the role of technology had always been part of school life but its role was highlighted this year. "It is a really useful tool. However, it's a tool. It's not the way we do everything," she said.

### Better relationships

Mrs Fenn said the remote learning period strengthened her team because they had no choice but to collaborate. "It was now more than ever we have to do this and whilst we already had that culture here at Taylor, I feel like it's strengthened our connection among us even more as professionals."

As a second-year teacher, Mrs Foster-Lomas was thrown in the deep end this year but always felt well-supported by her teaching team. "Wellbeing was a real focus with my classroom, not just within my teaching team, and we've really looked after each other, supporting each other with ideas and resources and lessons."

She also made a point of checking in on the wellbeing of her students and their parents throughout the year.

Increasingly this year teachers have had to play the role of the counsellor.

Mrs Burton found many teachers and principals were having to support students and parents with mental health challenges.

"This was never the job of an educator or teacher... We're asking them to deal with others' mental health and well being, when in fact they are dealing with uncertainty and feeling that they are at risk as well so that's definitely something that was really prevalent and to be honest still is now."

She believes educators need more support in this area to ensure the burden of mental health support doesn't fall entirely on their shoulders.

Mrs Fenn found that school was a good place for children to discuss the pandemic and its impact on them.

"Children know this is a place where they come and they're safe and they can talk freely and openly about those things.

"We have great relationships with families too so that our messaging with families is that

it's actually good for children to talk about these things if they want to if they need to and we give them the space and time to do that."

### New approach

The lessons learned from this year will change education going forward in some simple and profound ways. Parent teacher meetings via Zoom were a big hit and Dr Cain said survey results suggested many schools would stick with the online meetings next year.

Meanwhile, at Taylor Primary School teachers have noticed that changing the morning routine from hosting a whole school assembly to having students enter from different gates and go straight to their classes has made the morning rush calmer and more productive.

Perhaps the biggest change will not be vis-

**This was never the job of an educator or teacher ... We're asking them to deal with others' mental health and well being, when in fact they are dealing with uncertainty and feeling that they are at risk as well so that's definitely something that was really prevalent.**

ible at all. Dr Cain said the survey responses suggested that planning to teach in an online format improved in-person teaching techniques. "Teaching through an online interface has encouraged me to deeply examine my underlying theoretical understandings about teaching and learning," one respondent said.

Dr Cain said the year has tested people's assumptions about how schools can and should work.

"We shouldn't get set in our way and we think this is how school should operate," he said. "But when it gets shaken up, then you know if you're open to change and you've got a growth mindset. Then you look at it and go, well it wasn't half bad actually we'll take that on."



The public seems to have picked up that the PM is all spin, but Labor still has to learn how to play a straight bat on climate policy. Pictures: Getty Images, digitally altered

## Third-rate leaders fail climate Test

Ol' Climey has picked up a five-fer and is looking for more as Australia indulges in its national scorched-summer pastime.

MARK KENNY



IT SEEMED entirely appropriate that the final set-piece of the parliamentary year, the MYEFO (Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook), was discharged just hours before the Test cricket season commenced.

Not only is the first ball of the series regarded by many as the real start of the Australian summer, but the see-sawing five-day game and parliamentary politics are uncannily analogous.

Both are nationally defining contests, yet are too slow and arcane for all but the on-field players and die-hard aficionados to follow completely. And both are characterised by ebbs and flows, failed ploys, and fluctuating fortunes.

Like parliamentary performance, it doesn't much matter who appears to be in front so much as what brings the whole show to a close.

The game-altering significance of a dropped catch or a badly timed declaration might only become obvious once it's over.

The 45th parliament, which culminated in the 2019 election, demonstrated this point dramatically.

Success for Bill Shorten's poll-dominant opposition was such a formality that bookies paid out early. But an entirely routine week-two doortop press conference in suburban Adelaide signalled trouble.

It came in the form of a pretty orthodox delivery by a reporter merely asking - albeit persistently - what Labor's 45 per cent cut on emissions by 2030 meant for future economic growth.

On the back foot, Shorten misread the flight and was trapped plumb in front, his feet never moving.

The presumptive prime minister looked unprepared - or worse, devious - both confidence shakers, and especially so for oppositions.

Not for the first time, the deceptively slow ball of climate and energy policy had proved unplayable for an Australian political leader.

It was a gift to Scott Morrison, who hammered Labor's climate plan relentlessly as uncosted, ideological and a threat to jobs. Labor's timidity on boldly owning the opportunities of a 21st-century low-carbon economy, much less explaining the crippling costs of inaction - the real danger - magnified a sense of risk for voters, right when they were weighing unknowns such as curbs on franking credits, capital gains tax concessions, and negative gearing.

The beneficiaries of Labor's clay feet would soon emerge. For Scott Morrison, unloved but safe, the prize was the prime ministership of Australia, this time off his own bat.

For Anthony Albanese, darling of Labor's progressively minded rank-and-file when he had faced off against Shorten in 2013 (the latter winning via the caucus), it was the long-coveted leadership.

Yet jilted Ol' Climey, who'd helped dispatch John Howard in 2007, Malcolm Turnbull in 2009 (ETS), Kevin Rudd in 2010 (CPRS), Julia Gillard in 2013 (carbon tax), and Turnbull again in 2018 (NEG), wasn't finished yet.

Heading into 2021, ethereal climate dynamics are again in play, with the perverse effect that Labor is being pulled to the right and the Coalition, arguably, to the left.

Albanese faces increasingly brazen public pressure from a newly bellicose Right faction which says the "crazy" 45 per cent pledge from 2019 was anti-worker madness.

Alive to the danger, Albanese would now rather skip forward to a 2035 target, viewing 2030 as too close.

Yet the real problem is that a restated 2030 target risks either mimicking the government's inadequate 26 per cent commitment, or being seen as more ambitious, inviting the same cost-to-growth furphy.

In recent days, freshly resigned former frontbencher Joel Fitzgibbon has stepped up his extraordinary public war against the Left's Mark Butler, an Albanese confidant and Labor's spokesman on climate and energy.

In a direct repudiation of Butler - and by extension, Albanese - Fitzgibbon advocates a net-zero target for 2050 - i.e. the easy bit - but says interim targets, as set to be endorsed at Labor's March 2021 national conference, should be left to the government alone.

This is a serious split, and comes as Right-faction figures privately warn that losing the next election is likely, and going further backwards is probable too - a message calculated to stoke leadership discussion.

Morrison and his ministers have been happy enough to kick all this along, but the PM knows the Coalition has its own burgeoning climate dilemma.

Since the "miracle" election, the worst drought-turned-bushfire crisis on record has caused a palpable shift in public opinion.

With every state and territory regardless of political stripe committed to net-zero emissions by 2050, the pressure on the federal government is intensifying.

Those governments have been joined by major employer groups, virtually every company of any scale, the major banks, big insurers, and financial institutions, and by most significant economies.

Australia is a pariah on emissions, its myopic third-rate leaders locked in a self-referential struggle for marginal advantage.

Add to this that even former international laggards such as the US, Japan and China are joining the global climate push, and Australia is increasingly being depicted as an outlier, an international ne'er-do-well.

Known for his "flexibility", Morrison might want to embrace the 2050 pledge but lacks the two things necessary to bring it off: first, the conviction (and credibility) to carry such a dramatic volte face within his party room and beyond, and second, the courage needed to square up to his party's deliberate coal-brandishing intransigence.

Skitting that Australia will "meet and exceed" its Paris pledge without resorting to Kyoto carryover credits has simply not cut it.

Such sophistry was exposed when Australia's performance was judged too weak to even warrant a speaking slot at last weekend's UN conference.

Puffed up by Australia's solid performance on the pandemic, Morrison had forgotten the basic principle of politics and sport: the game is always moving.

That's the other similarity between politics and cricket: both can be seriously affected by the weather.

But there's one important difference too. Only one is actually a game.

Mark Kenny is a professor at the ANU's Australian Studies Institute and host of the Democracy Sausage podcast.

## Make sure we don't let MYEFO go to our heads

SIMON COWAN



IT FEELS like almost no time has passed since the Treasurer delivered the much-delayed 2020 budget. That gruesome document disclosed a massive budget deficit, and the potential for government debt to exceed \$1 trillion in the near term.

Yet the relative closeness of the budget did not stop this year's Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) having a distinctly different look and feel.

Of course a lot has happened since the budget. A significant amount of the commentary following it focused on the "optimistic" assumption that a vaccine would be widely available next year. As it turns out, several vaccines are already being rolled out in the US and the UK.

This is not the only note of optimism from MYEFO. Most of the key economic indicators are predicted to be far more positive than expected in the 2020 budget.

Real GDP is forecast to be more than two percentage points higher, with improvements in household consumption and dwelling investment also noted. The participation rate and jobs growth are also up.

The overwhelming sense from the 2020 MYEFO is that things are not as bad as feared in June or predicted in October. Yet there are three reasons to temper our ebullience.

First, the economic indicators have sharply declined in the last 12 months and remain far below their 2019 level.

Unemployment in the 2019 MYEFO was expected to be 5.25 per cent, falling to 5 per cent by 2021-22. Unemployment in the 2020 MYEFO is expected to be 7.25 per cent (a figure itself distorted by JobKeeper) and 6.25 per cent in 2021-22. It is important to note that while the percentage difference (1.25 per cent) might seem small, it represents more than 150,000 people.

Wages growth, which was already anaemic moving into the pandemic, is also set to be more than 1 per cent lower. GDP growth is down, while inflation remains mired below the bottom rung of the RBA's inflation target. Indeed, MYEFO indicates we experienced a slight deflation in 2019-20.

And although there is a convergence of economic indicators by the end of the forward estimates, the problem is that this won't catch up the output gap created by the sharp plunge into recession this year.

Second, the budget remains in much worse shape than it was this time last year. The 2019 MYEFO predicted a \$6 billion surplus in 2020-21. The 2020 MYEFO instead predicts a \$198 billion deficit.

Indeed, if 2020 hadn't been such an extraordinary year, it's hard to imagine how any budget document containing an almost \$200 billion deficit could possibly be couched so positively.

It is one thing to celebrate the deficit moving from \$15 billion to \$5 billion, as the government did in the 2018 MYEFO. It is quite another to crow about a shift from a \$214 billion deficit to a \$198 billion deficit.

On a cumulative basis, the budget balance has deteriorated by almost half a trillion dollars, and the decade of deficits following the 2009 global financial crisis is likely to be followed by another decade of deficits following the COVID-19 recession.

The government is also benefiting from low expectations. After a year of so much



Josh Frydenberg is still very much in the hot seat. Picture: Getty Images

bad news - week after week, month after month - even minor good news stories have a tendency to be amplified.

In this case, there is a real concern that much of the good news we are seeing in MYEFO doesn't signify a robust and enduring economy recovery. Instead, it may be little more than the post-lockdown/post-pandemic bounce predicted in the budget - just happening faster than expected.

The peculiar nature of the COVID-19 recession - the very deep plunge into recession and the pent-up demand created by the lockdowns - always had the potential to create a sharp initial rebound.

It is not that the bounce isn't good news. It's just that the rebound out of recession doesn't mean the tough times are over. Far from it. The fact that things are going better than expected now, doesn't seem to translate into a permanent improvement in economic outlook.

For example, unemployment won't go below 6 per cent until 2022-23. That's a fairly slow return to economic normality.

This fear is reinforced by the fact that most of the improvement in the budget bottom line comes in the near term, and diminishes over the course of the end of the forward estimates. As MYEFO notes: "Gross and net debt are expected to be broadly consistent with the estimates published in the 2020-21 budget". The \$1 trillion debt remains.

Typically, MYEFO doesn't set out a radical shift in government policy, or detail a raft of new government policies. And the fact the budget was delivered in October this year, rather than May, made it even less likely this would be a policy document.

However, this means the criticisms of the budget itself still stand. There remains a marked lack of a medium-term plan to close the output gap. The better than expected short-term news actually makes this starker and more urgent. As the vaccines roll out and the immediacy of the pandemic begins to recede across the next 12 months, the ability of the government to introduce substantial reforms will likewise diminish.

The government will have to work hard to convince us all that its skill in navigating challenging economic conditions is equal to its skill in controlling the pandemic.

In areas such as industrial relations reform and further tax reform, the government may find far greater opposition than it had at the height of the pandemic.

It is this likely imminent return of "politics as usual" that should be the greatest temper to any optimism arising from MYEFO.

Simon Cowan is research director at the Centre for Independent Studies and a regular columnist.