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Lies and Falsehoods

**The Morrison Government
and the new culture of deceit**

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B O O K S

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INTRODUCTION

The prime minister of Australia is a liar. Scott Morrison is a peddler of falsehoods and lies intended to deceive and mislead the public.

That statement is at once banal, problematic and a rich topic of discussion. All politicians lie, surely; to single one out for doing so is a statement of the obvious. And yet to state such a plain fact is to tempt a writ for defamation under Australia's litigant-friendly legal system, in which a politician could very easily win damages from someone accusing her or him of deliberately uttering falsehoods and seeking to mislead.

But Scott Morrison isn't just any other political liar operating in normal political times. Other politicians might traditionally have twisted the truth, omitted important facts, peddled self-serving narratives, exaggerated and engaged in spin. But outright, verifiable lying was once relatively rare. It was treated as a sin to be avoided, something unseemly that needed to be explained away or justified by reasons of high statecraft.

Now, blatant lying that can be easily checked has become a standard element of political discourse. We live in a new

era, kickstarted by Donald Trump in the United States and carried on by Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom and Scott Morrison in Australia.

Neither Morrison nor Johnson are freewheeling fantasists in the Donald Trump style. *The Washington Post* recorded over 30,000 false or misleading statements by Trump in his four-year term in office. By any stretch, that's an Olympian feat of mendacity unlikely to be rivalled. But the American president opened the way for other leaders to embrace lying, both as a standard tool of political debate and a core part of their political personae, in a way that decouples political discourse from a basis in reality and relocates it in emotion, fantasy and conspiracy theory.

This coincided with a frontal assault on the concept of truth in public debate. 'Leave' campaigners in the Brexit referendum peddled lies and declared that the British people had had enough of experts who dared to offer negative assessments of the impact of leaving the European Union. In Australia and the US, climate denialism, funded by fossil fuel interests, is rampant among conservatives. Vaccine denialism, once a fringe menace in Western societies, has morphed into open conspiracy theory, embracing ideas of the deliberate creation, or non-existence, of COVID-19, the role of communications technology and vaccines as mind-control mechanisms, along with the now-standard Big Pharma conspiracy. Millions adopted the lurid and absurd QAnon conspiracy theory, originating as an online prank about international paedophile rings – just one noxious weed in the thousands that proliferate on the internet.

The rise of liars and the assault on truth are more than simple coincidence. The two phenomena are the product of

the same forces that turned much of Western politics on its head in the 2010s: populism, polarisation and tribalism. None of those is new – each has been observed before across political history, as has the act of lying by those in power. But the upsurge in these forces over the last decade happened just as the biggest communications technology revolution since the printing press began inflicting truly colossal change on societies, economies and industries.

The dismissal of facts has dire implications for societies and democracies. While there is limited evidence that regular lying by a politician actually induces people who would not otherwise have voted for them to do so, lying has systemic consequences. No society can function without trust. Not at a structural level, where systems of trade and commerce depend on trust, nor at the day-to-day level of being able to assume that the food we are being sold isn't poisonous, that other drivers will stop at traffic lights, that people will be truthful on matters important to us.

Plainly these do not happen 100 per cent of the time. But we all act on the basis that they are usually true, that it is universally agreed they *should* be true, that we have recourse if they turn out not to be true. Lying dissolves the trust that glues us together as a functional society.

Being able to agree on a common reality is a foundation stone of democratic governance. The compromises and trade-offs of benefits and negatives that form the basis of competing interests working together require agreement on what is true and real. Protecting non-majority interests in a democracy relies on accepting that reality is not simply what the majority want or believe. Any system based on an electorate deciding which parties will govern requires an acceptance that other

parties act in good faith and share the same view of the world and the public interest. That's even more true at a time when our societies face complex challenges – climate change, pandemics, shifts in global power, rapid technological change.

As ethicist Simon Longstaff wrote for *Crikey* in May 2021:

Without truth no democracy can stand. This is because without truth there can be no informed consent, because without truth there can be no informed citizens ...

To deny access to the truth is to imperil the legitimacy of the democratic system as a whole because, in the end, it risks being built on nothing true.

Lying by politicians is also catastrophic for public policy. To insist, as Scott Morrison does, that Australia will 'meet and beat' its Paris Agreement emissions targets, or that there is no credible energy transition plan that does not require a greater role for gas, is to assert that Australia's carbon-intensive economy doesn't need to change and that government doesn't need to play an active role in facilitating that change. Once facts are abandoned, policy becomes whatever suits the ideology of those in power, or whoever can purchase policy outcomes. Public policy becomes like the legal system of any dictatorship – there's no need for evidence because the outcome is predetermined by those in power, and the interests who influence those in power, without regard for any higher principle.

Crikey's investigative series, *A Dossier of Lies and Falsehoods*, was published in May 2021, and detailed thirty verifiable lies and falsehoods (the number has since grown) uttered by Scott Morrison over the last three years. It forms the basis

of this book, and was predicated on exactly the concern that lying and the abandonment of facts as the agreed currency of political discourse have implications far beyond those currently in power. Long-term damage to democracy and policy-making has already been inflicted and will continue without some kind of remedy or reversal.

Our investigation into political lies did not select Scott Morrison as a partisan choice. We would have done exactly the same if a Labor prime minister had been engaged in egregious lying. As will become clear in this book, party affiliation has little to do with a tendency to lie. There are liars across the political spectrum, populists of all persuasions who have embraced deception as a central part of their political personalities. Anyone concerned about our ability to govern ourselves democratically should call out liars, no matter what party affiliation they hold.

Many in Australia's media, however, are reluctant to do so. They are hesitant partly because the word 'liar' carries a weight that deters journalists and editors from employing it (a weight that discouraged high-profile newspapers in the US from initially using the word about Trump). In Australia, it also carries a legal weight, exposing whoever uses it as a potential target for legal action.

Calling out one individual is only a part of the problem. The eruption of lying in politics isn't especially about the personalities of the leaders involved, nor merely the result of individual choices. The political removal of prominent liars would address the symptoms, not the cause. And while Trump was defeated in 2020, he still achieved the second-highest popular vote in US history and effectively retains control of the Republican Party. He continues to polarise US

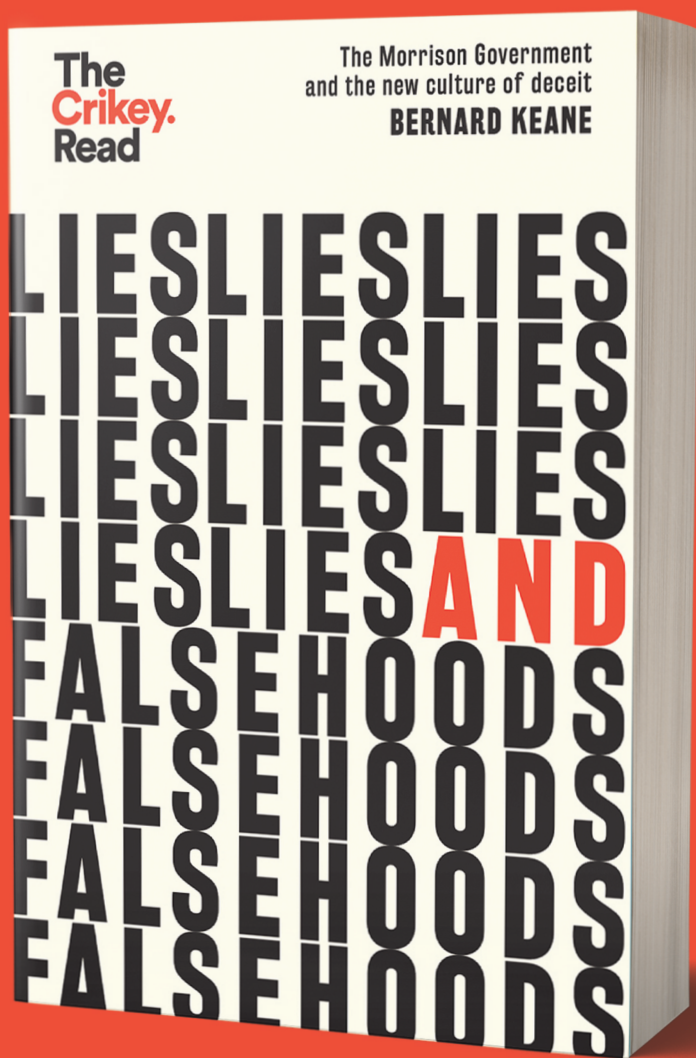
politics, driving the extremism of much of the Republican base, and inciting some on the right of US politics to violence and even terrorism.

Considerable research has been devoted to identifying effective ways to address the problems of misinformation, fake news and belief in conspiracy theories. Right now they appear limited. Fact-checking, filtering harmful content and countering false information seem to have limited efficacy at best, and may only address the symptoms rather than the disease itself.

First, we need to identify, understand and assess the liars and the environment within which they lie. This book starts with an examination of Scott Morrison and his brothers-in-deception elsewhere around the world. Then we attempt to locate the phenomenon of lying in the broader political and communications environment of the 2010s. Finally, we try to tackle the complex issue of how – or even if – we can do anything about it.

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