

crikey essay

Why Rudd is Failing

by Bernard Keane





Introduction: Kevin Rudd in Trouble

“Kevin Rudd has led Labor to the brink of a first-term defeat that was unthinkable just weeks ago”, wrote *Crikey’s* Canberra Correspondent Bernard Keane on 10 May.

The news was dire. Essential Media’s new poll told that Labor’s once-formidable lead had given way to a 50:50 two-party preferred outcome. And the reason that Labor and the Coalition are neck and neck just months before an election? Yes, we need to talk about Kevin.

As Keane explained, according to Essential:

The number of voters who regard him as a “capable leader” has fallen 14% to 55%; a similar fall has occurred for “good in a crisis” to 44%; 10% fewer regard him as trustworthy or more honest than other politicians, and there was a 10% rise to 55% in the number of people who regard him as out of touch.

The findings were backed up by subsequent polling from Newspoll and Nielsen.

It’s not that voters are being drawn to Opposition Leader Tony Abbott — it’s that Kevin Rudd seems to be actively repelling them.

In this *Crikey Essay*, Keane examines how Kevin 07 ended up in this mess and details how the Prime Minister could still recover from the body blows dealt to him, if he acts quickly.



What's behind the "collapse" of Labor's support in opinion polls?

Part of it is historical context. Kevin Rudd's government has been unusually popular, for an unusually long period of time. It is not, as Tom Jones might say, unusual for post-honeymoon governments to be level with or trail oppositions. But this collapse has been swift and has been focussed entirely on Rudd, whose appeal to voters has collapsed as spectacularly as Labor's vote.

Nor has this been a poor government. It has been poor in several areas, yes, but its overriding achievement of preventing the GFC from causing a recession is significant. Anyone who thinks its stimulus packages were unnecessary or over-blown has either forgotten about, or doesn't care, just how much damage the 1990s recession did to our social fabric and economy, and how much utter misery it inflicted on hundreds of thousands of people. Preventing a recurrence of that is a major achievement.

Rudd's lack of communication skills have been blamed by pretty much everyone, including me, for at least part of the collapse, although it's only a few weeks since we were lauding the return of the 2007-vintage Rudd at his health debate with Opposition Leader Tony Abbott.

In fact, on health, Rudd demonstrated a hitherto-unseen capacity to remain on-topic for extended periods. As always, he insisted on having a rolling series of announcements, as if he is unable to dissociate the idea of arguing a case for reform from having a press release with dollar signs on it. But he applied himself to the task of selling reform, and in fact, well after COAG and its agreement had come and gone, Rudd was still visiting hospitals to spruik the plan, often in regional areas.

That begs the question: where would we now be if he had applied himself similarly to the task of selling his emissions trading scheme, instead of relying on Penny Wong and treating it as a stick with which to beat the opposition?

But communication can't explain the sudden collapse either. Not fully.



The media vs Kevin Rudd.

There's no doubt the tone of media coverage of the government has changed dramatically, and not in its favour, since the start of the year, with a determined air of get-square for the high-handedness with which Rudd's office treated and manipulated the media for two years.

There are also the permanent anti-Labor elements of the media. News Limited, primarily via *The Australian*, has been conducting a war on the government. Considerable resources have been deployed by that newspaper in an entirely confected campaign against the Building the Education Revolution (BER) stimulus component, even after a National Audit Office report discredited the entire effort. News Ltd also employs several commentators whose entire job is to smear and attack Labor, unrestrained by any adherence to facts or reason, so that even when Labor adopts pro-business policies it is criticised. The Coalition faces no such permanent media opposition.

While declining newspaper readerships and the dominance of free-to-air news bulletins mean News' attacks are not directly harmful, they influence other media coverage. In particular, the ABC now frequently marches in lockstep, repeating its polling spin verbatim, deploying resources to follow up attacks and giving a regular platform to anti-Labor commentators.

Nevertheless, media hostility is a fact of political life for Labor and it has won before in the face of it. It doesn't satisfactorily explain the collapse of Rudd's appeal either. So let's reconsider the nature of Rudd's appeal.

A PM in search of a persona.

Kevin Rudd is unusual compared to previous PMs. He is unique amongst post-war contemporaries in not having been in public life for an extended period before leading his party to victory — he had been an MP less than 10 years, and a public figure for much less than that. He is also hard-to-read for the public — you have to go back to Malcolm Fraser for a similarly distant prime ministerial



personality although, unlike Fraser, Rudd shapes himself depending on his audience. But in contrast to his three immediate predecessors, who all had strong public images, Rudd came to the prime ministership without a well-defined public image beyond that of a policy wonk.

In his pursuit of the prime ministership, much of Rudd's political persona, therefore, consisted of what people projected onto him, rather than what he projected.

There are a couple of competing interpretations of Rudd's 2007 election win. Neither is correct, but neither is entirely wrong. And both come back to the basic issue that Rudd's political personality depended on what people were able to project onto him.

One, essentially conservative, was that Rudd was Howard-lite, winning by pretending to be a more up-to-date version of Howard.

This is a press gallery/Canberra-insider interpretation. It misinterprets Rudd's election strategy, which was to ensure voters did not think he was a risk in the way Mark Latham was seen as a risk, and then to carefully pick the issues on which he attacked Howard, leaving the rest as uncontested. The strategy was important in luring support from voters who needed reassurance that Rudd was not a risk.

It was called 'me-tooism' and it frustrated both the Coalition and their media supporters no end. After the election, conservatives used it to console themselves with the thought that they hadn't really lost, because an essentially conservative prime minister had replaced Howard.

But it should not be mistaken for Rudd deliberately aping Howard.



The other interpretation (at least for my purposes) is a progressive one — that Rudd captured a national mood for change. In this interpretation, Rudd was anything but Howard-lite — he was more a pre-Obama change agent who answered a growing mood for a swing back to the Left amongst Australians, particularly young people. That Rudd was a personally conservative, centrist technocrat with no real labour movement roots was carefully glossed over.

Just as the Howard-lite interpretation comforted some conservatives, so this interpretation has served the cause of self-interested groups such as GetUp, however at odds with reality it was.

Labor assiduously and cannily promoted both ideas, allowing people to see what they wanted to see in Rudd — and building up potentially conflicting expectations. Essentially conservative voters wanted Rudd to be similar to his predecessor but without the manifest problems that Howard accumulated — his age, most particularly, and his cynicism, manifested both in his increasingly transparent attempts to buy elections, and his casuistry.

More progressive voters wanted Rudd to substantially abandon key elements of the Howard approach on climate change, indigenous affairs and asylum seekers.

Such a support base may be difficult to retain in the long-term — apart from anything else, the mere act of being prime minister means there is an ever-decreasing capacity for voters to project whatever they like onto you. However, it was enough to allow Rudd to secure the Lodge and craft his own political persona, offering his own story to Australians rather than relying on them to see what they wanted to.

Rudd's problem is that he has not yet done that, and he has also managed to upset both progressive and conservative voters at the same time — leaving him exposed to a catastrophic collapse.



What Rudd has managed to do in recent weeks is send the wrong signals to all kinds of voters, rather than any one group.

In abandoning his own emissions trading scheme, as well as temporarily freezing asylum applications from the two biggest sources of boat arrivals, Rudd has clearly alienated progressive-minded voters in favour of shifting to the right on the political spectrum. But the action also showed him to be ready to jettison his own principles, especially on the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS), having strongly supported the need for climate action previously.

That decision would ostensibly seem to attract more conservative-minded voters, who may have been amenable to the sort of scare campaign Tony Abbott had been preparing to run about the impact of the CPRS. But in revealing Rudd as a leader unwilling to stand by his most important values, it exposed him to a more dangerous perception — of lacking core principles.

Rudd's failure to be true to himself.

John Howard often declared of himself, in ostensible self-deprecation, "You may not agree with me but you know what I stand for." It was a lie — Howard changed his position on critical issues repeatedly. The "never ever" man introduced a GST. The man who attacked Asian immigration ran the country's highest-ever migration program. The professed advocate of small government and lower taxes ran the biggest and highest-taxing government in history. The man who wanted to "gut" Medicare became its "greatest friend". But Howard's skill was to either hide fundamental reversals of position (by quietly but steadily lifting immigration and the size of government, for example) or argue they reflected a becoming capacity to learn on the job.

Until his *7.30 Report* brain explosion the other night, I'd have said the same thing about Tony Abbott.



Rudd has failed in this regard. Having singled out only a handful of critical issues on which to separate himself from Howard, it was incumbent on him to seal the deal with voters on each of them. He did it with WorkChoices and the Stolen Generations apology. But not on climate change. Having sold himself so aggressively as a conviction politician on climate change, his reversal — and particularly his poor handling of it — sent a clear signal to voters of all persuasions, and not an especially appealing one.

The result is both types of voters are unhappy with Rudd. Rudd has started projecting back to them, and they don't like what they see.

Worse, voters have been giving Rudd their full attention. For the first time since 2006, the Liberals have been united for an extended period, however grumpily, behind a leader. Without the incessant distraction of Liberal in-fighting (Howard-Costello, Nelson-Turnbull, Costello-Turnbull, Turnbull-Turnbull, Turnbull-Abbott), voters have been able to concentrate on Kevin Rudd.

These problems aren't terminal for Rudd. Few politically-aware people are single issue voters. Individual issues may be influential, but outweighed by others in total. He needs to clarify what exactly he is projecting back to voters.

How Kevin Rudd can win voters back.

Firstly, he needs to give disillusioned progressive voters a reason to back him. Strangely, the Resource Super Profits Tax (RSPT) and the froth-mouthed reaction to it from the mining industry, and what is increasingly looking like that industry's political wing, the Liberal Party, provides this.

Abbott's homing-in on the RSPT (to the exclusion of virtually any other content) in his Budget Reply was a smart ploy. But it also presents voters with a simple ideological choice for what is a stringently economic rationalist piece of policy: Labor advocates a greater take from an undertaxed industry, the Coalition represents the views of foreign multinationals. It's the sort of political



dynamic you might have seen in the 1970s, and it will draw strong support from traditional Labor voters and unions.

Rudd also needs, if he can't assure voters he is prepared to stand up for what he believes in, to at least demonstrate that his other forte, of managerial competence, is intact. This will enable him to tap into the same sentiment that saw voters continue to re-elect John Howard as a competent economic manager even when they understood that he was prone to lying, feigning ignorance or twisting his words.

Last week's Budget will be effective in that regard, particularly given it has clearly neutralised the Coalition's one remaining effective economic argument about debt.

Both of these, however, need Rudd to present voters with a compelling story framed in a Labor-friendly way, something he has failed at in every issue other than health. He needs to do something similar with the RSPT to what he did with health, visiting every mining community in the country like he went to every hospital, selling the benefits of the RSPT on the ground to workers and the communities that support them, hitting the regional media hard, making the case on the ground.

And he's got to end his misconception, perhaps derived from his years as a state government apparatchik, that political communication is all about managing the news cycle and rolling out a constant series of press releases with dollar signs in them on the basis that voters don't understand anything else.

He also needs to get his effective ministers out there, in the same way he had the underrated Nicola Roxon back him on health. In that, he has already been well-served by Wayne Swan, who is now providing the sort of strong support that Prime Ministers are entitled to expect from Treasurers. Fortunately, in economics, he has the two outstanding politicians of the current era, Gillard and Tanner, backed by NSW Labor's coming man Chris Bowen, to deploy.



He will also be assisted by Tony Abbott's bizarre decision to brazenly promote a return to elements of WorkChoices. In the spectacle of Abbott's mini-calamity the day after his Budget Reply, his indication that elements of WorkChoices would be coming back was missed by many, but it again shows that while Abbott has a streetfighter's smarts, he has lousy judgment and ideological blinkers. In fact, every time Abbott has made the Liberals the issue with a policy pronouncement, he has looked bad and taken the heat off the Government.

Rudd can save himself, but he needs to change the way he does business. He's no longer in the happy position of being whatever voters want him to be.