

Australia: prejudice of the Left

By Maurice Newman, The Australian, 17 March 2015

FOR the Left there is no greater hate figure than Tony Abbott. After all, the Prime Minister is a liberal of the European school and embraces all the policy instincts and beliefs the Left despises. What's more, Abbott effectively toppled Australia's first female prime-minister, the Left's beloved Julia Gillard, and it is determined to get even.

Abbott is a fiscal conservative. He stands for lower taxes. He believes in smaller government and competition. He wants freer trade, freer markets and fewer regulations. He encourages entrepreneurship and innovation, which run counter to the ideals of the collective. He sees a place for private education and private health. He is opposed to open borders. He believes migrants should respect our values and our laws. He is for work and self-reliance, not welfare. He's a monarchist, a Catholic and, worse, not of the global warming faith. Above all, for as long as he remains Prime Minister, he is an ever-present threat to the socialist legacy of the Gillard years.

Unrelenting hostility

It is why he has been met with unrelenting hostility and portrayed as unfit for office. He was denied the honeymoon normally granted to new governments. He has been called untrustworthy, a misogynist, a racist, a sexist, a homophobe, a bully and Gina Rinehart's butler.

This demonisation was eagerly retailed by the leftist media. Groupthink reigned supreme. The Abbott government was depicted as incompetent, heartless and unfair. The Coalition's successes were disparaged, distorted or drowned out. The crusade was highly effective. As Mark Twain observed: "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

In such a mutually reinforcing hothouse, this ferocious campaign fed into ever-worsening polls, causing panic in Liberal ranks. Rather than putting the national interest and the party first, some members blinked and began airing their dirty linen in public. Latent ambitions surfaced but a spill motion was lost. It was a watershed moment that benefited no one, failed to satisfy the movers and, most critically, means the Prime Minister must now choose fewer battles.

Public sentiment has turned

Strangely, since the spill motion, public sentiment as reflected in opinion polls has turned. Maybe respondents are gaming the pollsters? Or perhaps the crowd is waking up to the delusions it was fed? For the time being, at least, the Coalition and Abbott have improved their standing with the people who count: the electorate.

With the passing of the leadership crisis, as the budget approaches, the government is promoting a softer image. The talk is of budget consolidation, not cuts. Childcare is firmly on this agenda. There may be more good news for small business and infrastructure spending.

But where are the offsets? The Medicare co-payment is "dead, buried and cremated" and, with it, \$1 billion of revenue over four years. Defence Force pay is up by \$200 million. There's \$1bn a month in interest payments to meet, all from a budget with declining revenue. Labor's recipe

for economic growth and taxing multinationals to cover revenue shortfalls is no answer. It can count on neither. The government must choose a spending and revenue policy priorities and coherently pursue them.

The job is far from done

So it's one thing for the Prime Minister to reflect his partyroom's wishes that "because we've done so much hard work already, we won't have to protect the commonwealth budget at the expense of the household budget", but the job is far from done. Yes, there has been a lot of hard work, but progress has been impeded. Headwinds in the Senate mean structural flaws remain embedded, ensuring measures will have to be taken to protect the commonwealth budget at the expense of the household budget. But when? With the economy growing below trend, real wage increases arguably negative and a dollar under pressure, declining living standards will make budget savings increasingly difficult politically. Ideally, more should be done now. However, while polls remain equivocal and conceited leadership aspirants divert attention from the main game, getting priorities right is vital.

Whatever people think of Abbott, he must be credited with saving us from some of Labor's worst legacies. True, on occasions his government's messages were mixed. Many of the measures were poorly communicated or designed. Some failed to pass the parliament for base political reasons. But in circumstances when easy options had to be stared down, Abbott stood up and the nation is the beneficiary.

But the Left doesn't care

The Left wants Abbott gone. So when he advocated sensible spending cuts for remote Aboriginal communities, he was abused because his "lifestyle" reference was considered culturally insensitive. What happened to straight talking? Can we offend nobody's feelings? Must we always sugar-coat?

The Intergenerational Report is drawing attention to the dramatic long-term cost of denying short-term reforms. The numbers are disturbing for insiders and some of the recommendations are scary to voters. But we ignore it at our peril. For it to be taken seriously will require a quantum leap in the quality of economic and political debate. Too often the commentariat writes what it hopes rather than what is. Prejudice passes for analysis. So the government has a critical role in communicating the reality.

The risk that ultimately reality will collide with hope

Affordable prosperity for future generations depends on the reform process begun by the Abbott government continuing. It rests on leadership stability and the support of the people. The longer it is delayed, the greater the risk that ultimately reality will collide with hope. The ensuing adjustment would not be pretty.