

## Can Rudd Survive?

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**A**s of this morning, the main game in Canberra must surely be “when will the ALP give Kevin Rudd the flick, and will he go quietly?”.

Although little has yet been said publicly apart from the occasional question on a possible challenge by Julia Gillard (until recently, no more than mild journalistic mischief), tensions are rising. The early signs have been visible for a while, with ministers like Wong and Roxon carefully couching answers with prefixes like “As the Prime Minister has said, Kerry ...”. Backbenchers are worried about immigration and new marginal seats are at risk in WA from the government’s proposed resources rent tax. Although in world terms there is nothing harsh or even remarkable about this tax, it has served to underscore the government’s (and in particular Rudd’s) ungainly communication. Independent senator, Nick Xenophon, said recently the government couldn’t sell heaters to eskimos and last night on the 7.30 Report, Kerry O’Brien made treasurer Wayne Swan look juvenile in his attempts to justify the timing of advertising for the tax. Now (AM, this morning), one of this country’s most informed journalists, Chris Uhlman, says many in the government know there is something very wrong in the PM’s office and it may be the PM himself. Out of the blue, Rudd is suddenly on the nose in opinion polls and the always unforgiving Australian Labour Party is panicking. Things are coming to a head.

Even though a switch to Gillard may well be enough, on novelty value alone, to shore up the party’s chances for another term, the problem in considering a tap on Rudd’s shoulder is three fold. How, so soon before an election, do you credibly change a leader who until recently was miles high in the polls? But how do you not, when defeat suddenly seems a real possibility? And ... would he make a fight of it? The health option could be a way out.

Rudd (supported by this writer as the obvious choice at least three leaders ago) came in with huge potential, assuring a new style of politics. Virtually all the promises with which he gilded that assurance have been broken or perceived to be broken. On TV he loses you halfway through the first sentence and in general he’s begun, in fact, to look like a loser. Rudd is committing the worst of political sins. He’s boring the nation to death. He needs to go if the ALP wants to improve its chances of retaining government, which on economic management it probably deserves to do. *Mea culpa*. This writer was wrong.

This writer is unconvinced, though, about Julia Gillard who despite her populist inclinations, folksy TV style and a work ethic rivaling that of Rudd himself, has shown herself in her education portfolio to be a party animal first and foremost, placing political gain ahead of educational principle. If principle counts in leadership, foreign minister Stephen Smith may also be worth a look, though his time may not have come.

The climate change reversal; the ditched child care centres; the scrapped home insulation scheme (with the headmasterly humiliation of the previously totemic ‘Minister Garrett’); the apparent abandonment of promised homes for the homeless and perceived downgrading of the national broadband scheme; the continuation, essentially unchanged, of the Northern Territory indigenous intervention; the placement, again, of

refugees in remote desert locations; the hard hats and safety vests; and, above all, the collapse of the moral spine promised by Mr Rudd.

It all comes on top of the admission a couple of weeks ago by the alleged alternative PM, Tony Abbott, that you shouldn't necessarily believe everything he (Abbott) says publicly. Put it all together and the perception, whether or not correct, is clear. On all sides, they lie. Australia, always cynical about its politicians, briefly heartened by the prospect of a new dawn, has now plumbed a new depth of political depression.