

Tony Abbott's Three Strikes *But Is He Out?*

March 26 2010

Seldom do new political leaders drop the bundle quite so quickly as Tony Abbott, Australian opposition leader since December 8. But Mr Abbott seems to have accomplished a comprehensive reversal – from party saviour and man of the people to opportunist of unsound judgment – in just a few weeks.

Early December presented an archetypal wet / dry division reminiscent of Thatcher's Westminster, with the Liberal Party evenly split. Abbott got home by one vote, the displaced Malcolm Turnbull went to the backbench and the opposition was transformed into something which even John Howard might have called old school. The sinister saintliness of Bronwen Bishop again stalked the halls of shadow cabinet. More controversially, Barnaby Joyce demanded and got Finance. Bishop, sensibly, hasn't said much yet, perhaps sensing that matters are not quite as settled as they may appear.

Not so Barnaby. From the outset, Abbott was conceding his finance spokesman required occasional "correction". A series of Joycian gaffes culminated in an embarrassing prediction of government debt default. By early February, after private warnings from "senior Liberals" about Joyce, Abbott must have realised he'd made a terrible mistake.

Then, he wasted a perfect chance on the ABC's Four Corners to re-define perceptions of his views on women and their place in the scheme of things – views seen as reactionary, even allowing for some unfair reporting of private family advice. In a program clearly produced with his agreement, Abbott actually reinforced perceptions he could have buried; and several appearances by Howard (who seems to be having real difficulty accepting responsibility for his party's plight) didn't help. With dark humour, Four Corners presented an exquisitely side-lit, colour-saturated Howard, shot close up from low down, playing the elder statesman and outlining the undoubted benefit to Abbott of his own fatherly guidance. It was turgid stuff.

And finally, there was this week's debate on health reform where Abbott's Press Club performance might be described as clumsy verging on coarse. It's a pity because the Prime Minister's presidential approach to health requires scrutiny. Moreover, Abbott is right to question the objectionable audience reaction meters. But he made the robotic Rudd look warm, genuine and a clear winner when the result probably wasn't that cut and dried. Now, he's had to dump Joyce.

Through all this, Turnbull has been the model backbencher, excepting some early salvos from his own website. Now, he's openly signaling new intentions, letting it be known he'd requested the front bench position relinquished by Joyce. An ominous sign for Abbott. Saying nothing, Turnbull is again the elephant in the room.

Abbott is a nice man and in many ways has brought a breath of fresh air to Australian politics. God knows, it needs it. But the political judgment of a leader who said climate change was "crap" is now compromised. The penny must be dropping among those "senior Liberals" that they may just have made a ghastly miscalculation last December. Perhaps Nick Minchin, more than anyone responsible for Abbott's elevation, departs at just the right time.