

Policy Implications of Leadership Instability in Contemporary Australian Politics

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Australia's Liberal-National Party (LNP) Coalition government under Prime Minister Tony Abbott has already confronted leadership instability, despite its decisive election victory over the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in September 2013. One of the great ironies of contemporary Australian politics is how the conservative LNP has become subject to similar party leadership turmoil which dogged the previous Rudd and Gillard ALP governments.

The recent leadership speculation is the direct result of Abbott's LNP government breaking its election campaign promises; particularly introducing harsh and inequitable fiscal austerity measures, including proposed cuts to health, welfare and education, which have been frustrated by crossbench opposition in the Senate. Never a particularly popular figure, with an abrupt personality lacking sensitivity to the need for policy consultation, Abbott's personal approval ratings have long been in steep decline, with the LNP remaining well behind the ALP in opinion polling.

Facing potential defeat in the next federal election due in 2016, amid a weakening economy, the LNP backbench may well feel desperate enough to mount a successful challenge against Abbott. However, it is unclear whether a new leader would enable enough policy change to allow the LNP to restore trust with the public, given factional and ideological divisions residing within the LNP. While a rapid turnover of Prime Ministers is not entirely unique in Australian history, it does appear that an era of greater volatility has returned to Australia's political landscape, with potentially adverse consequences for effective public policy implementation.

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Introduction

Labor's Leadership Saga

It has been generally assumed that the leadership of political parties in Australia politics is relatively stable, with it being fairly uncommon for party leaders, especially prime ministers to be challenged and lose their position outside of elections. In first the 14 years of Australia's Federation, there were eleven Prime Ministers (PMs)(Alfred Deakin of the Protectionist Party three times, ALP's Andrew Fisher twice); and five in seven years between 1966 and 1972, with the retirement of Liberal Robert Menzies, and PMs Holt, Gorton, and MacMahon, until the election of Labor's Gough Whitlam (Ward & Stewart, 2010: 36). More recent history has also challenged the assumption of stable leadership; over the last 13 years, there have been 64 party leadership changes, at the State and Federal level (Liddy, 2015).

At the Federal level, the social-democratic Australian Labor Party (ALP) has suffered the most politically damaging volatility, dramatically demonstrated by the leadership rivalry between former Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. In 2007, the Labor Party led by Kevin Rudd returned to office, defeating the conservative Liberal-National Party (LNP) Coalition government, led by Prime Minister John Howard (Green, 2013:1-2) The Rudd Labor government successfully responded to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008, where a stimulus spending package kept the economy out of recession, one of the few developed countries to do so (Megalogenis, 2012: 340-345).

However, Rudd was largely undone by attempting to implement an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), aimed at reducing carbon emissions, which the Coalition had proposed in the 2007 election. After attempting to negotiate a compromise ETS with Opposition Liberal Leader Malcolm Turnbull in 2009, the hard-right conservative faction of the LNP (driven by climate change skeptics such as Liberal Senator Nick Minchin), was already dissatisfied with Turnbull's rather aloof and alienating leadership style (which would also be a failing of Rudd's leadership). A leadership challenge was contested on December 1st by Turnbull, Joe Hockey, and Tony Abbott; Hockey was eliminated in the first round, with Abbott elected Opposition Leader in the second round, 42 to 41 against Turnbull (Wanna, 2010 :279).

Confronted by Abbott's more relentlessly aggressive style, Rudd backed down from implementing an ETS, following the failure to achieve a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol at the UN COP15 meeting in Copenhagen. Amid declining opinion polls,

Rudd was successfully challenged by his Deputy Julia Gillard on June 23rd 2010, becoming the first female Prime Minister of Australia (Kefford, 2013, 137). Following the August 21st 2010 election called soon after (during which Labor's campaign was undermined by damaging leaks from disgruntled Rudd supporters), Gillard negotiated a minority government with the support of the Greens Party and some Independents, after the election result delivered a rare 'hung' parliament (Cassidy, 2010: 105-106, 234-235).

Despite delivering an impressive range of legislation on education and social security, as well as a temporarily fixed price on carbon (remorselessly called a 'carbon tax' and a 'broken promise' by Abbott and the Coalition), leadership speculation dogged the Gillard government, undermining its public image and disrupting any effective political marketing of its policy delivery. Rudd unsuccessfully challenged in February 2012, after which he lost his position as Foreign Minister; an abortive attempt by his supporters in March 2013 also failed. However, as opinion polls continued to decline with an election date looming, as Rudd retained a shallow advantage in public opinion over Gillard, desperate Labor MPs ruefully re-appointed him as Prime Minister after another challenge on June 26th 2013 (Evans & McCaffrie, 2014: 317-319).

Unsurprisingly, amid this leadership disunity, Labor was decisively defeated by the Abbott-led LNP Coalition on the election of September 7th 2013. The LNP won 90 out of the 150 seats in the lower House of Representatives; Labor 55, one each to the Greens, Katter's Australia Party and the Palmer United Party, and two independents; the two-party preferred (2PP) vote was 53.5% for the Coalition, and 46.5% for Labor. Under new rules implemented by Rudd after his brief return as PM, where the ALP membership was given a share of the vote as well as Labor MPs, Bill Shorten became Opposition Leader of the ALP, defeating Anthony Albanese (McCallister, 2015: 337).

The Abbott Coalition Government

A Honeymoon Soon Over

Once in office the Abbott Coalition government set about implementing its core campaign promises: repealing Labor's 'carbon tax' and super-profit mining tax; and its controversial Operation Sovereign Borders, turning back asylum seeker boats coming from Indonesia, and continuing to detain asylum seekers arriving by boat in offshore camps, on Nauru, and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (a practise re-established at the end of the previous Labor government). In doing so, the Coalition could claim it had finally 'stopped the boats', a policy which was generally

popular among the electorate, although widely criticised by human rights organisations, including the UNHCR. However, having never been particularly popular among the public, Abbott's support soon began to slip down in opinion polls (Maley, 2015).

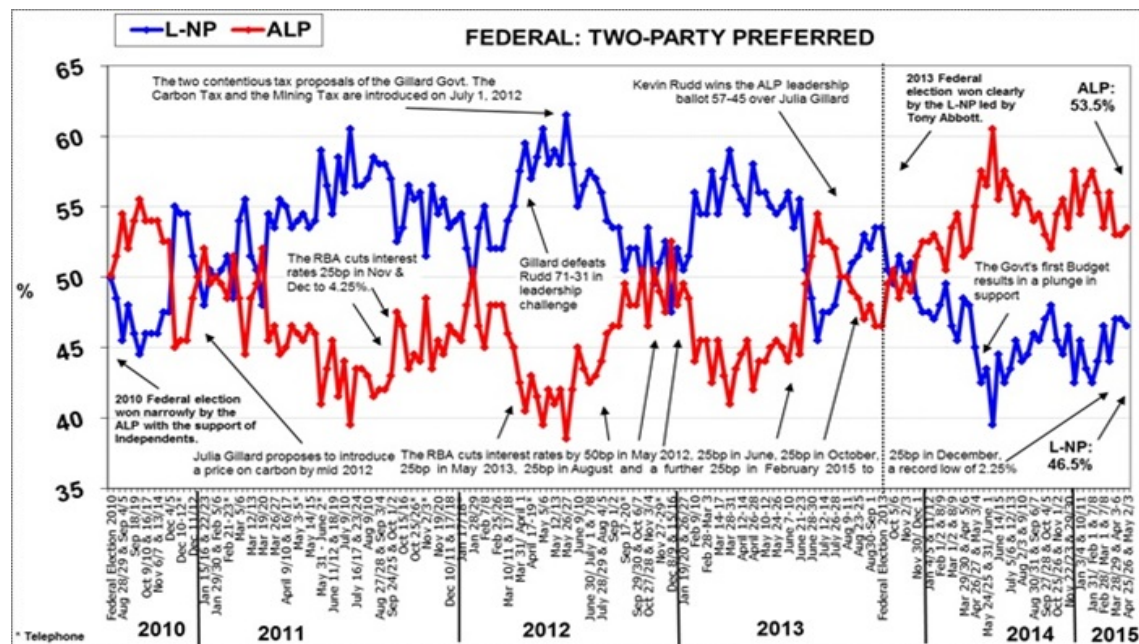
With approval ratings for Coalition soon falling behind the ALP, as early disillusionment with the new government set in, accelerating after the Abbott government's first harsh budget, delivered by Treasurer Joe Hockey in May 2014. Aimed at reducing the deficit, the budget effectively broke many of Abbott's promises in the 2013 election campaign, including pledges not to cut health, education, and welfare spending (Millar, 2015). Many of the budget's measures were blocked in the new Senate, which came into effect from July 2014, following a unique re-election for Senators from Western Australia in March, after ballot papers for the 2013 election were lost by the Electoral Commission. The current Senate comprises eighteen cross-benchers, the highest number ever, which include: 10 for the Greens, their highest number yet; three initially from the Palmer United Party (PUP), although Senators Jackie Lambie and Glenn Lazarus would soon quit to become independents, after falling out with PUP leader Clive Palmer; one independent (Nick Xenophon); and one each from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the Democratic Labour Party (whose Senator John Madigan would also later separate from his party to stand as an independent); Family First; and the Motoring Enthusiasts Party. The LNP has 33 Senators, the ALP 24 (Wanna, 2015: 280-281)

As the fallout of the stalled budget continued into 2015, Abbott's so-called 'Captain's picks', of unilateral decisions without consulting Cabinet, continued to be unpopular, particularly the decision to restore Australian knighthoods for the Australia Day Honours list on January 26th, extraordinarily awarding one to Queen Elizabeth's husband, Prince Phillip. Only 12.1% of Australians supported this, according to a poll afterwards, with frontbenchers Malcolm Turnbull and Julie Bishop being preferred as Liberal leader, by 45% and 30.5% respectively, indicating their potential as leadership replacements; Abbott only received 18% support (Medhora, 2015).

Reflecting this decline in the public mood, on February 9th 2015, the Liberal backbench brought on a party room vote whether to proceed with leadership ballot; it was defeated 61 to 39, but the fact that up to 40% of backbenchers were prepared to vote against Abbott indicated how rapidly his fortunes had declined, only halfway through a term of office. Abbott was also aided by there being no clear declared

leadership rival at this stage; the moderate Turnbull would not have been favoured by the Liberals' conservatives; Bishop was also held in some suspicion by party hardliners; the candidate most likely to be favoured by the hard right, Social Services Minister Scott Morrison (formerly Immigration Minister) did not enjoy enough public popularity (BBC, 2015).

Figure 1: Federal Two-Party Preferred Opinion Polling, 2010-2015



Source: Newspoll

Budget 2015 and Economic Vulnerability

Having survived this political ‘near-death’ experience, Abbott set about shoring up support among his disgruntled backbench. The 2015 budget delivered in May aimed to repair the political damage of the previous one, providing generous tax cuts to small business and farmers, which were generally well received. The other arm of the Abbott government’s supposed political strength, national security, was reinforced in the budget by increases to security and defence spending, and cuts to foreign aid (as well as cuts to the arts, scientific research, and environmental funding. The ‘debt and deficit’ rhetoric of the 2014 budget, which was ruthlessly applied against Labor when in Opposition, was quietly abandoned, with the Abbott government having the highest proportion of GDP of tax revenue and government spending (25.9%), since the first budgets of the Howard and Rudd governments. A budget surplus is now estimated to be reached in 2020/21, assuming optimistic projections on commodity prices and the

Chinese and Indian economies remain bouyant (Koukoulas, 2015).

Labor and the Greens attempted to pressure Treasurer Hockey by citing modelling showing the 2015 budget will have a negative impact on those on lower incomes, as did the 2014 budget. Key budget measures are still likely to be blocked in Senate, particularly those making health and education most costly. Annualised economic growth rates of 2.3% should supposedly aid the government's record on economic performance; however, this is the lowest figure since 2011, and continues a downward trend, down from 3.5% last year. Australia's growth is now ranked 19th in the OECD. Trade figures are also problematic, with the trade deficit for April at \$3.888 billion, the largest on record, largely driven by a deteriorating terms of trade, particularly due to falling coal and iron ore export prices. Household incomes and retail sales also have remained flat, so these ongoing pressures on Hockey and the Abbott government on the future of Australian economy will remain a serious concern (Austin 2015).

The Greek/Euro crisis has only fed speculation about the potential ongoing instability of the global economy; but even more of a concern is the recent 30%+ slump in Chinese stock markets, which has already had an impact on Australian share markets (Dyer and Keane, 2015). China's official public debt is 15%, but the total of internally held debt in its 'shadow finance' system, could actually be an estimated 282%. The end of the mining boom, weak domestic activity, and a potential property 'bubble' (used by Coalition as an attempted political weapon against Labor, with Abbott claiming that Shorten wanted to see the value of people's homes collapse) indicates uncertain economic fortunes ahead. This will be extremely troublesome for the Abbott government in the leadup to the next election due in 2016, if the economy continues to slow, which will put pressure on the government to bring on a stimulatory pre-election budget, which will only increase the level of public debt, and raise the deficit, undermining its own self-proclaimed economic credentials (Das, 2015).

As of July 2015, interest rates have kept on hold by the Reserve Bank of Australia at 2%, with unemployment steady at 6%. The Australian dollar reached a six-year low of 73.98 US cents, which counters the effect of the slump in commodity prices to some extent; but, the terms of trade has declined 27% over past two years, as commodity prices have declined. Iron ore is now forecast to reach \$48 a tonne, with the price declining by 21% over a week since the Chinese crash. The value of commodity exports – metals, ores and minerals – has now been overtaken again by exports of services, which last occurred in 2009, before the recent mining boom.

This undermines the Abbott government's optimistic plans that economic growth and the resulting revenues will eventually reduce Australia's levels of debt and deficit, and see a return to surplus (Janda, 2015).

Abbott's 'War On Terror' – Key to Political Security?

While backing away from economic stringency, Abbott's pursuit of a stronger appearance on national security has sought to regain support from the public and within his own parliamentary party, and attempts to portray Labor as 'soft' on terrorism and asylum seekers. Soon after the near-leadership vote, the government began exploring a proposed law (known as the *Allegiance to Australia* Bill) to strip dual Australian nationals of their citizenship, if they were found to be supporting terrorist activities. Abbott was backed in this in a letter sent to him by 43 conservative backbenchers, drafted by the instigator of the February challenge. This indicated that Abbott's leadership appeared to be becoming more secure. However, divisions soon emerged within Cabinet over the proposed bill, with leaks to the media revealing that senior Ministers, including Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, and even Nationals Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce were concerned over giving the Immigration Minister (presently Peter Dutton) powers to revoke citizenship without legal recourse (Rundle, 2015)

The citizenship law amendments have been remorselessly used by Abbott to conflate the issue of national security Labor (and the public broadcaster, the ABC) as weak on terrorism; as with asylum seekers, the Coalition is pandering to its support base and the conservative media (particularly News Corporation), playing on public anxiety and xenophobia. This is a long-running policy approach of the Coalition, going back at least to the Howard government, and the 'War on Terror' following the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 (Keane, 2015a). Further divisions over national security emerged among the government later on though, when Turnbull gave an erudite speech warning the threat of terrorism should not be exaggerated, as this into the hands of Islamic State (IS - also referred to by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*). This classically liberal defence of the tradition of the rule of law and democratic principles in the face of danger was a veiled criticism of Abbott's bellicose rhetoric, with his constant referral to *Da'esh* as a 'death cult', which is 'coming to get us'. In a remarkable exaggeration of scaremongering, Foreign Minister Bishop also called IS a greater threat than the Cold War (despite IS's lack of strategic reach, or nuclear weapons)(Iggulden, 2015).

Following developments in Ireland and the USA which secured rights to same-sex marriage, divisions also were exposed within the Coalition over this issues, where Australia remains the last English-speaking developed country which does not have legal same-sex marriage anywhere in its jurisdiction. The debate over same-sex marriage has become a headache for the socially conservative Abbott. He faces a potential revolt by more moderate Liberal MPs, who have submitted their own private members' bills advocating same-sex marriage, joining those previously submitted by the Greens and Labor, which hopes to divide the Coalition on this issue, given that polls consistently give public support for same-sex marriage at around 70%. Conservative Liberal MPs warn that Abbott will face a backlash if he allows a conscience vote on same-sex marriage to proceed, comparing the issue to the struggle over the ETS, which saw Turnbull replaced by Abbott in 2009. The Liberal rank-and-file branch party members are generally socially conservative, pressuring their MPs to oppose any change. 82 Coalition MPs remain opposed; only 18 support voting for same-sex marriage, while 23 are undecided (Matthewson, 2015).

Serious tensions within the Coalition were again exposed with a recent decision by Liberal Environment Minister Greg Hunt (and the NSW Coalition government) to approve a \$1.2 billion Chinese-owned coal mine in the electorate of Agriculture Minister Joyce, who is firmly opposed tG it going ahead. This dispute within the government followed the release of a lacklustre Agriculture White Paper, with only \$1 billion in agriculture support projects announced, instead of the expected \$4 billion (Guardian, 2015).

Can Bill Shorten and Labor Get It Together?

It remains to be seen though whether Labor under Bill Shorten can yet effectively exploit these divisions within the government. In an attempt to present an image of constructive bipartisanship, and to avoid being politically outflanked on various contentious issues, the ALP under Shorten has actually cooperated with the government on a range of policies. In the last sitting day of parliament for its winter session, the government voted to amend laws to secure the offshore processing of asylum seekers against a potential High Court Challenge, which was supported by ALP, being fearful of being wedged on national security. Labor also voted with the government for an amendment to ensure there is no mandatory requirement to report the sexual abuse of children in asylum seeker detention camps on Nauru and Manus Island. Labor also supported the formation of the new paramilitary 'Australian Border

Force', which has amalgamated Customs law enforcement with Immigration Department detention services. Labor has also voted with the government to allow stronger internet censorship, through metadata retention (Taylor, 2015).

However, the more the ALP has cooperated with the government, the less Shorten appeals to public, with greater public awareness of Shorten translating into lower approval ratings; bipartisanship has therefore brought no political benefits. A former Secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Shorten is the least experienced Opposition leader in recent times, only being elected to parliament since 2007, and appointed to the Ministry in 2010. This exposes another cost of the period of Labor Rudd-Gillard rivalry, where many experienced Ministers were driven out, especially after Rudd's return in 2013 (Tingle, 2015). Shorten's dubious role as one of the key factional powerbrokers behind Labor's recent leadership rivalry and challenges was further exposed when Shorten admitted to lying in a 2013 radio interview about his role in the Rudd-Gillard leadership spill; Shorten had then denied he was having talks with Rudd, and was fully supporting Gillard. The history of the Rudd-Gillard rivalry rather inconveniently resurfaced with the recent broadcast of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) documentary series *The Killing Season* (ABC, 2015).

This admission preceded Shorten's appearance in July 2015 at the Royal Commission into trade unions, established by the Abbott government upon its election. Grilled on his previous role as Secretary of the Australian Workers' Union, Shorten admitted a failure to declare up to \$40,000 in corporate and union donations for his 2007 election campaign. This was damaging, but unlikely to be politically fateful, given the overall lack of transparency on political campaign donation laws – politicians and parties can issue late, or updated declarations years after campaigns, which Prime Minister Abbott himself has done. Shorten performed fairly confidently under questioning, answering over 900 questions over his two-day appearance (Karp, 2015). Labor claims the Royal Commission, costing at least \$80 million, is a political witchhunt, following previous Coalition attempts to tie Julia Gillard to the activities of corrupt trade union officials. Labor countered by raising the recent allegations of Italian Mafia figures making donations to the Liberal Party during period of Howard government (Cassidy, 2015).

The fallout from the Labor national conference of July 2015 will be another obstacle to overcome in the lead-up to an election year. Contentious issues include confirming policy towards asylum seekers, same-sex marriage, the Free Trade Agreement with

China, and carbon emissions, producing a publicly bruising, messy confrontation between the Left and Right factions; the conference being the most finely balanced since that of 1984, with 196 delegates from the Left faction, 197 from the Right, and four nonaligned (Hurst, 2015). Should nervous Labor MPs again feel desperate enough to mount a challenge against Shorten, if they fear impending electoral defeat, this is now harder to do ironically, after Rudd passed reforms before losing the election in 2013. Leadership challenges in the ALP now require a vote from the membership, as well as the parliamentary Caucus, only after 75% of the Caucus votes to approve a challenge when in government, or 60% of in Opposition. However, entering into another round of leadership instability would be electorally disastrous, with no serious alternative contenders yet emerging at any rate (Bourke, 2015).

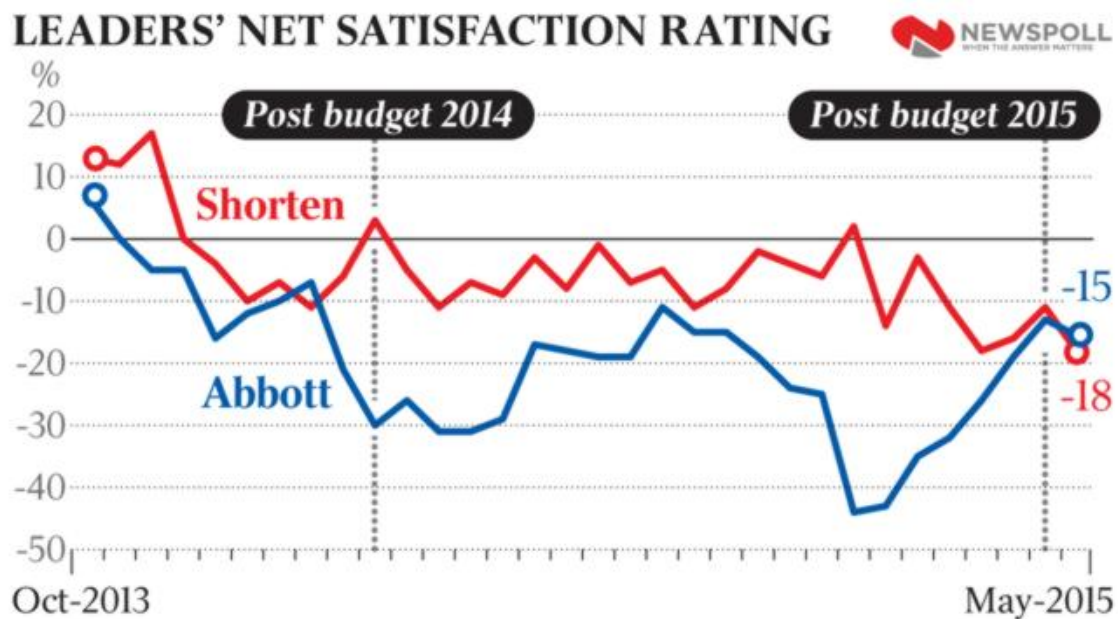
Towards Election 2016

Abbott's measures to improve his support among disgruntled backbenchers appears to have made his leadership more secure, although problems of disunity among his Cabinet persist (Morris, 2015). The cynicism of the electorate is in danger of further deterioration, as Labor and the Coalition become more partisan, and short-term focused, rather than pursue long-term policy debate and reform. This is seen in the ongoing relatively high net dissatisfaction ratings for both Abbott and Shorten (Bowe, 2015). A general election is due sometime in 2016, generally expected to be called by Abbott sometime in the spring. However, it is the prerogative of Australian Prime Ministers to call early elections at a time of their choosing; there is already speculation that Abbott may feel tempted to take early advantage of Shorten's recent difficulties, which have tarnished his image. The Liberal Party's federal director has stated an election will be in at least 15 months, so early election talk is speculative at most; there can be no doubt though that Abbott and the Coalition is already gearing up for an election (Borrello, 2015).

With neither Labor or the Coalition, Shorten nor Abbott appealing to the public, the Australian electorate therefore seems doomed to endure another cycle of disillusionment and cynical weariness with politics, uninspired by either of the major parties. The Greens and other minor parties may thus be in a better position to capitalise on this. Recognising this potential, the Greens have introduced a bill to reform voting for the Senate, which would remove above-the-line party preference deals, and allow optional preferential voting (as in NSW, and other states). This would prevent the likelihood of microparties being elected again with a tiny proportion of the primary vote, as occurred in the last election. This is clear political

goal of the Greens to block their ‘third-party’ rivals, and would also suit the two major parties. There would be no advantage then in calling an early double-dissolution election (of the whole Senate, rather than the regular half-Senate elections), before such reforms are implemented, as it would only make it easier for more microparties to be elected to the Senate. An early double-dissolution election is therefore unlikely for numerous constitutional and political reasons (Green, 2015).

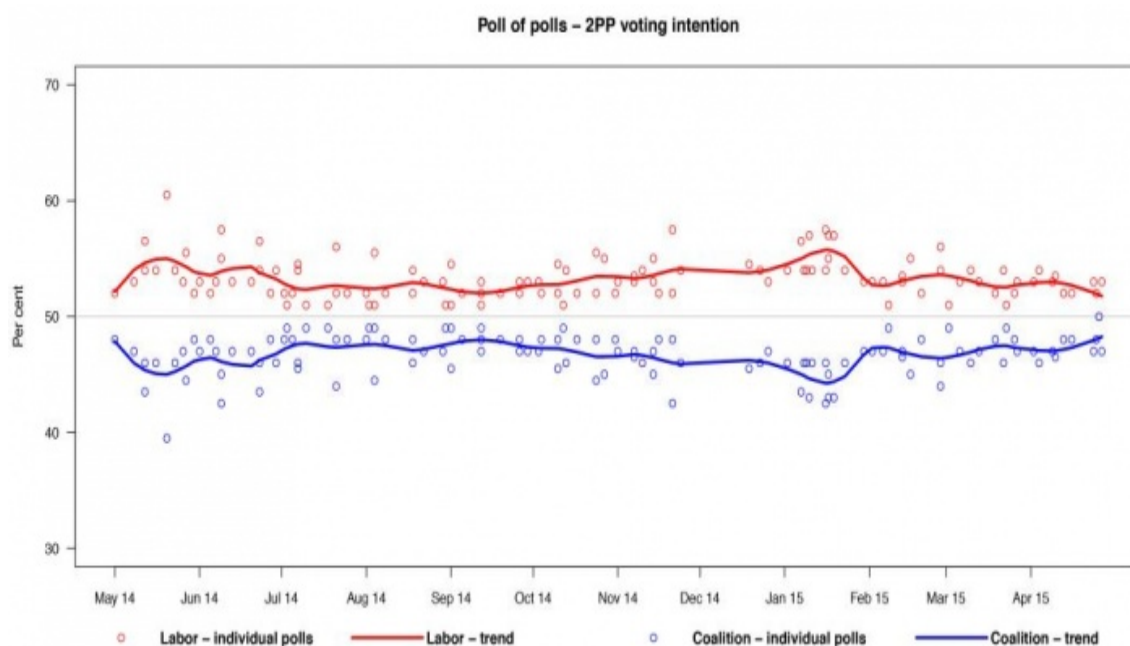
Figure 2: Leaders’ Net Satisfaction Rating October 2013-May 2015



Source: Newspoll

Recent polls show the Abbott government back in a losing position, before the short-lived (and shallow) ‘bounce’ after the 2015 Budget. Despite ramping up national security threats, and indulging in other ‘culture war’ rhetoric against the ABC and same-sex marriage, this has not appealed to the public, even though it may play well with the conservative Coalition party base. Both Abbott and Shorten have continued to see their approval ratings decline, with Shorten having overtaken Abbott as preferred PM again. Labor has been ahead of the LNP in 149 out of the last 151 polls, since April 2014; the Coalition has generally been behind in the polls overall since 2013 election (Murphy, 2015).

Figure 3: Two-Party Preferred Voting Intention May 2014-April 2015



Source: Crikey

Conclusion

A Wasted, One-Term Coalition Government?

Tony Abbott confronts a political dilemma; after ‘stopping the boats’, scrapping the carbon and mining taxes, and abandoning the repair of the ‘debt and deficit’, his government has only really been left with national security left to run as its major focus. This issue may have already reached its limit of political effectiveness, as well as resulting in a more risky foreign policy (White, 2015). Any other area of important policy reform has effectively been abandoned, as Abbott and the Coalition have been operating as if they were still in Opposition mode – permanently campaigning to damage their political opponents, rather than seriously pursue economic management, a strategy which appears to be being caught out, as uncertainty in the global economy worsens. The Abbott government has abandoned promised policy reform in several core areas: in the financial services industry (as recommended by the Murray Inquiry); the budget deficit (which has increased, along with public debt, from \$273 billion to \$373 billion, under Abbott’s government); media reform; competition reform (as recommended by the Harper Review); superannuation tax concessions; tax reform; housing affordability; climate policy; and infrastructure. Abbott’s government is therefore arguably turning out to be less effective than the previous Rudd-Gillard Labor period in office (Keane, 2015b).

However, Abbott remains an effective negative campaigner, despite his relative public unpopularity. Relishing a political fight, he could well mount a successful scare campaign against Labor in the next election, particularly against Bill Shorten, given his similar levels of unpopularity. It has been historically rare for Australian governments to lose an election after only one term in office; however, challenges to a sitting Prime Minister in their first term were also rare, a convention which was overthrown during the politically disastrous rivalry between Rudd and Gillard. It is not out of the question that Abbott will also set a similar standard for political instability and failure.

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