

**TITLE: Slogans don't make good policies**

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The stunning victory by the ALP in Victoria on the weekend raises a number of big questions for the Coalition parties nationally, the most significant of which is whether their strategy for winning elections in recent years has ruined their chances of governing like grown-ups.

Tony Abbott is 10 points behind in the two-party preferred polling and, despite his enormous landslide three years ago, the polling from Queensland says Premier Campbell Newman could also be a oncer. What is going on?

In the past five years, the Liberals have taken more and more leaves from the Tea Party play book. Simple solutions and simple slogans are used to attack their opposition and to whip the fires of discontent in the community. Conservative strategists know it's easier to change the votes of angry people than reflective people, so they have set out to make people angry. It worked.

When in opposition, the Liberals are strong on blaming government for all ills and finding mismanagement and wasteful spending wherever they look. For a party whose main philosophical belief is that government is inefficient, it seems opposition may be as good as it gets for modern conservatives.

Abbott convinced millions of Australians that a small carbon tax for which they were generously compensated was the reason that they felt financially stretched. The strategy worked to get him elected but, not surprisingly, it did nothing to solve the underlying problems facing the electricity sector and the economy.

Abbott also came to power promising not just to scrap the carbon tax but to leave the generous compensation package in place. Such populism helped woo voters but did nothing to help solve his imaginary budget emergency.

Put simply, the arguments and the approach that made Abbott a highly successful opposition leader are the ones that have made him the least popular first-term prime minister in the history of opinion polling.

Few people would seek election to the board of a company or community organisation on the basis that said organisation is a burden on its members to be minimised. Even fewer would succeed in such a gambit. But that's exactly the strategy of the modern liberals: "vote for me and I will do less harm than the ALP".

Convincing voters that their money is being wasted isn't hard. For a federal government that employs hundreds of thousands of staff and spends hundreds of billions of dollars per year across 20 portfolios, it's certain that every few months waste will be uncovered.

But while no one wants governments to waste money, voters want far more than low-cost government; they want health, education and transport systems that work. While most voters would prefer budget surpluses to deficits, they also want government investment in infrastructure to keep pace with population growth.

Telling voters that their woes are caused by wasteful Labor governments and that Liberal governments can deliver lower taxes, stronger budgets and better services has proved an effective election winning strategy. But as the look of genuine confusion in Joe Hockey's face in recent months attests, delivering such a magic pudding is harder than promising it.

Of course some in the Abbott government try to blame their woes on an uncooperative Senate. The reality, however, is that Abbott accumulated political power by being ruthlessly obstructionist in opposition. He can't be surprised that the current opposition and crossbench senators would choose to drink from the same well. The principles of good government are almost entirely unrelated to modern notions of good electoral strategy. The "message discipline" of Tony Abbott and his capacity to distil complex issues into three-word slogans is what got him elected, but is shaping up as one of his biggest problems.

The Prime Minister yesterday defended his capacity, and that of his office, to govern. In evidence, he cited his team's ability to quickly destroy the Rudd and Gillard governments. The problem for the government, however, is that there is no real link between the ability to destroy your opponents and the ability to build community and Senate support for a reform agenda.

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