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**TITLE: Audacity of hype: finding fault no real fix once in government**

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Tony Abbott tore through Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd (again) but now, according to the polls, Bill Shorten is the most effective Opposition Leader in history.

Abbott's Coalition is the least popular new government on record and they haven't even passed a horror budget yet.

Incumbency used to be seen as a great political asset but, these days, it seems leading the opposition is easier than leading the country.

Nearly 20 years ago, Bill Clinton transformed politics with the idea of "continuous campaigning". Rather than governing for four years and then seeking re-election during the formal election campaign period, Clinton embraced the idea that governing was the election campaign.

The four years between presidential election campaigns became one long string of electoral opportunity. The legislative agenda diverted away from the important and towards the popular.

Until recently, it seemed that, in an environment of continuous campaigning, the machinery of government gave the incumbent a massive advantage. Hundreds of thousands of public servants, hundreds of millions of dollars for government advertising and a bottomless pit of taxpayer-funded policy and media advisers provided, it was assumed, an enormous advantage.

But the scoreboard suggests otherwise. So what's going on?

Opposition politicians have one enormous advantage over incumbents. Put simply, they don't have anything they actually have to do. Sure, they are expected to attend Parliament but their superiors tell them how to vote and what to say. Other than that, they have ample opportunity to sow the seeds of doubt and disappointment in the government.

Concerned about the cost of living? That would be the government's fault. Interest rates too high? Sounds like government. Boss treating you badly? Yep, you guessed it, that would be the government's fault as well. Opposition has become the political equivalent of ambulance chasing. Just show up after any bad news and blame the government.

The problem with governing is it actually takes time to develop workable solutions to problems and far longer still to implement them. The machinery of state that was supposed to give a campaigning advantage is only an asset when the government is setting a long-term agenda. When it comes to rapid response to the news of the day, that same machinery of state is simply lead in the government's saddles. While government departments, rightly, tend to focus on the constitutionality and workability of policy proposals, opposition MPs feel far less constrained.

Rudd was the first Australian prime minister to govern as though he was in opposition. As has been widely reported, he was prone to having such "great ideas" on planes that he thought they could be launched as soon as he landed. While such an approach allows a politician to seize the moment, it also means the machinery of government becomes a burden.

Abbott's success as opposition leader was defined by his ability to keep things simple and focus entirely on the issues the polling told him would win votes. If a tricky issue emerged, he would simply "let it through to the keeper". Leading a country to prosperity is, however, a bit harder than leading an opposition to victory.

Foreign policy never rates highly on the list of issues voters care about but, as Abbott has recently discovered, you have to deal effectively with your neighbours whether it polls well or not.

This week's announcement the Australian Bureau of Statistics may be unable to maintain the quality and breadth of their statistical collection highlights the way modern governing has shifted from solving real problems in favour of addressing imaginary ones.

Despite the Prime Minister's stated passion for families, the ABS has already had to cancel its Work, Life and Family Survey. Abbott has committed to spending up to \$7 billion on his paid parental leave scheme but the ABS lacks the funds to collect the data that would help design it in the short term and evaluate it in the long term.

Of course, if you are more interested in how things look than how they work, you can see the appeal of running down the budget of organisations like the ABS. Employment Minister Eric Abetz found out this week, when he talked of his fears of a "wage explosion", that all that pesky time series data collected by the ABS can make a minister look pretty silly pretty quickly.

But even if Abbott doesn't care enough about the pressures faced by new parents returning to work, surely he cares about the more traditional Liberal issue of economic management. According to Saul Eslake, chief economist at Bank of America Merrill Lynch, while there is no reason to believe the funding crisis has materially affected the quality of ABS data, he has "no trouble believing that, at some point, it will".

As Abetz showed this week, there is a big difference between what a minister may "feel" is happening in the economy and what the data actually shows.

It is now clear oppositions can be highly effective in winning votes by simply parroting what the community feels and simply promising to do a better, if vaguely specified, job of addressing those feelings after the election.

But, as Rudd and Abbott have shown, it is much harder to solve problems from government when you are running on gut feel and the nous of some political advisers.

It's too early to tell what kind of opposition leader Shorten will be, as his current success stems largely from the chickens Abbott scared away during his time as opposition leader coming home to roost.

Perhaps if Abbott is determined to behave like an opposition leader, Shorten should treat the public with respect and actually behave like an old-fashioned alternative prime minister.

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