

TITLE: Tony Abbott's drop and run tactic: Infatuated with the present, blind to the future

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PUBLICATION: The Canberra Times

PUBLICATION DATE: 25/11/14

LINK: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/tony-abbotts-drop-and-run-tactic-infatuated-with-the-present-blind-to-the-future-20141121-11rfse.html>

Tony Abbott was made for "drop and run" politics.

A key part of media training for politicians, the "drop and run" is a smooth strategy for deflecting a question, promoting a three-word slogan and moving on to attack your opponent.

Dodge the query, never dwell on details, just drop your message and shift debate to the weakness of the other side.

As opposition leader, Tony Abbott employed the drop and run technique with brutal effect. When asked how he would deliver election promises through a hostile senate, he'd respond with the ridiculous statement that he "would never do a deal with a minor party" before attacking the Gillard government for doing what he described as "dodgy deals" with the Greens. Drop and run.

While in opposition, Mr Abbott variously supported a carbon tax, an emissions trading scheme and his direct action policy. He both described the science of climate change as "crap" and explicitly stated he believed humans were significant contributors to global warming. In a bout of refreshing honesty, he once described himself as "a bit of a weather vane" in climate change. A bit indeed.

But drop-and-run politics allows for such changes of heart. The technique is great for creating snappy sound bites and easy slogans to share through the social media sphere. But when used excessively, politicians risk oversimplifying complex scenarios and falling prey to short-term policy thinking.

Such was the case last week when the Prime Minister stated he didn't want to talk about climate change at the G20 because he isn't interested in things that happen in 16 years' time.

He dropped that climate change is important, then he ran that – unlike US President Barack Obama – he cares about what's happening now more so than what's to come. He sharply defined the timeframe for 'what matters' for Australia, and it's particularly short.

If it's the case that the government isn't concerned with avoiding carbon emissions post-2030, then it's great news for Treasury. Australia's debt isn't forecast to become a problem until 2050. Joe Hockey has regularly conceded that Australia today has low levels of debt but he's pushed to make savage cuts to services based on a concern that debt levels may blow out by 2050. I guess we won't be worrying about that any more, Joe?

Ironically, not caring about the future would be a boon for the budget. We could, for one, avoid the \$35 billion cost of building 12 new submarines to replace the six we haven't used yet. Building submarines takes decades so they'd only be handy for potential future conflicts, which Mr Abbott's new short termism is unconcerned with.

And then there is the \$40 billion per year cost of tax concessions for superannuation. Leaving aside the treasury data that says the concessions don't really reduce the cost of the age pension, the new Abbott doctrine means that we needn't worry about the retirement incomes of anyone under the age of 49.

But before everyone starts to relax and enjoy the fact that we live in one of the richest countries in the world it's important to note that Tony Abbott's new found short termism was, ahem, short lived.

Less than a week after failing to convince world leaders that climate change wasn't important enough to discuss at the G20, Mr Abbott has reversed his opinion and declared that it is an "important issue" and that the world needs to commit to binding 2030 targets at the upcoming global negotiations in Paris.

Short-term thinking is great for sound bites but it doesn't make great politics. The Coalition's treatment of the Palmer United Party split this week is a case in point. In the drop-and-run world of politics, trouble for your rivals is a win for you. No need to help put out their fires (except perhaps with gasoline). But grown-up politics is more complicated, and more interesting, than that.

Jacqui Lambie's feud with Clive Palmer doesn't mean a vote for the government. Without any party discipline to be kept in line by, the PUP split means Senator Lambie can now freely carry out her threat to vote against every piece of legislation the government introduces to the Senate. For the government it means a suite of legislative changes – university fee deregulation, medicare co-payment, paid parental leave, and other high-profile budget measures – all remain logged up heading into Christmas.

In fact, Senator Lambie's obstructionism just makes it harder for them to pick up a vote somewhere else. Perhaps the most significant, and clever, part of the Senator's threat is that it isn't paired with a promise. While she has said she will vote against the government's agenda unless she gets her way, she hasn't promised to vote for their agenda if she does. Ouch.

The notion that the Senate is broken has become widely accepted, but it is not the Senate that is broken. It is a political culture of such short-termism in which an aspiring Prime Minister can actually claim he will never do a deal with a minor party when his own party is in coalition with one.

The Senate is behaving exactly the way the constitution envisioned. The constitution makes no reference to political parties. It explicitly set up the Senate as a States house to act as a check on the power of the Commonwealth. Prime Minister Abbott might think things that happen in 16 years are irrelevant, but the drafters of our constitution didn't. The document they drafted 113 years ago shapes the politics of today in the same way that our greenhouse gas emissions will shape the climate in 113 years' time.

The crisis is not in our Senate. The crisis is in the conflict between seductive short-term sound bites and stable long-term vision. It's between the words and deeds of our parliamentarians.

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