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TITLE: In Labor but the pain isn't enough

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Labor's problem is not so much what it stands for but what does it stand against. Tony Abbott is against the carbon tax, the Greens are against the big mining companies and Nick Xenophon is against pokies but Labor is against, drum roll please, the Liberals.

I know, I know, the ALP has passed lots of legislation and Julia Gillard is a great negotiator but that message clearly isn't winning any votes, and why would it?

Listening to the ALP talk up its legislative record is like listening to a 25-year-old telling you about how great their marks were in year 12. Who cares.

Of course passing legislation is an important part of changing the country, but if no one knows or cares about the actual changes then why would they care about the legislative instruments that were enacted by Parliament to give them legal force?

Of course the passage of all that legislation is actually clear proof that minority government isn't that bad but the government can't bring itself to say that.

As with so many of Tony Abbott's best attack lines the government simply ducks for cover rather than stands and fights.

From a media point of view it's clearly off message to talk about minority government, but from a reality point of view explaining the workability of minority government is essential to explaining the significance of the reforms the government has passed.

From a media point of view Tony Abbott's job is a lot easier than Julia Gillard's but, then again, it's no easier than Kevin Rudd's job back when he was opposition leader. Abbott and Rudd both took a leaf out of Pauline Hanson's play book: make "ordinary" people feel like victims and then blame a scapegoat.

While it is her racism for which she is best remembered, Pauline Hanson's political success was built on the same fact that she never met an "ordinary Australian" who she didn't think was missing out. "I feel your pain" was Hanson's credo, and "I blame the Asians" was her short-cut to solving their "plight".

Australians, it seems, love to hear how tough they are doing it. And Australian politicians are hooked on telling them.

Where Paul Keating once told voters they have never had it so good, the major parties these days know that, no matter how well things are going, it's better to agree that things are going badly.

There is no clearer evidence of this than the bizarre statements of Joel Fitzgibbon, Labor's recently demoted chief whip, who claimed that families earning \$250,000 a year were doing it tough in western Sydney.

While there is no doubt that there are families who earn a quarter of a million dollars a year but wish for more, there is also no doubt that it is mathematically impossible for any government to create an economy in which the average Australian is in the top 1 per cent of income earners.

These days it is relatively easy to make everybody feel dissatisfied from opposition, the problem is that from government it becomes impossible to cheer people up again.

Labor's willingness to pursue the Hansonite strategy of feeling everybody's pain is doomed to fail for two reasons.

First, while Kevin Rudd when he was opposition leader made hay out of all of the "cost of living pressures" that John Howard was causing, his fuel watch and grocery watch "solutions" failed to launch, let alone work.

And having argued from opposition that the official CPI wasn't a good indicator of the cost of living, as a government they now seem incapable of convincing anyone that our economy is experiencing a rare, and fortunate, period of low inflation and low unemployment.

The second reason that Labor can't turn its faux empathy for the millionaire battlers into political gain is that they are incapable of doing a very good job of the second part of the Hanson strategy, that is, they can't agree on a worthy scapegoat.

The fact that her solution had nothing to do with the problem was an asset not a strength. Rather than waste time debating the finer points of policy solutions Hanson was permanently on message.

To her supporters those who criticised her "solution" simply didn't understand the pain that regional Australia was suffering.

Howard shifted the blame around from the "politically correct elites" to the boat people and then on to the politically correct elites who supported the boat people.

Howard and, of course, Tony Abbott can now blame the carbon tax, the boat people, and the Gillard government who brought us the carbon tax and the boat people.

But who can Gillard blame?

They have tried to blame the boat people, but that upsets the Labor left. They have tried to blame the big miners, but that upsets the Labor right. They have even tried to blame the single mums, but that upsets women and the left.

So now they are trying to blame Tony Abbott for, of all things, being negative.

Labor has introduced a wide range of reforms. There is the carbon tax they don't want to talk about. The mining tax that collects no revenue and then there is the broadband network which people like but don't understand.

Rather than spruiking it full time, Stephen Conroy spent his political capital on a raft of media reforms that infuriated his own backbench as much as the media moguls. And he did it in an election year.

With six months to go, Julia Gillard can either switch strategies and try to explain that Australia has some of the lowest unemployment, public debt and taxes in the developed world or she can stick with Joel Fitzgibbon and pretend that the rich are doing it tough.

But if she is going to do the latter, she better find a scapegoat fast, or Tony Abbott will dawdle into the Lodge on election day. And then a week later he will declare that his government has restored the economy to miraculous health.

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