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TITLE: Walking both sides of the street

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PUBLICATION: The Canberra Times

PUBLICATION DATE: 24/06/11

LINK: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/news/opinion/editorial/general/walking-both-sides-of-the-street/2205865.aspx>

It can't be only nine months since the last federal election. It feels like an eternity. That, of course, is the objective of Tony Abbott who has worked 24/7 to argue that the election result, the formation of the minority Gillard Government, and in turn, any legislation it proposes, is illegitimate and undemocratic.

But this week Tony Abbott over-reached when he tried to conflate populism and democracy by proposing a plebiscite on the proposed carbon price. On the one hand the Opposition Leader said that the public must be asked, but at the same time he said that as prime minister he would still roll back any carbon price. Oh dear.

Many commentators have placed Julia Gillard in a no-win situation. Her Government is criticised for being poll-driven and lacking in conviction, yet she is lambasted for the poor poll results that inevitably flow from having to defend a yet-to-be finalised reform proposal as big as a carbon price.

Is it her job to lead or is it her job to follow? Is it fair to simultaneously criticise her for failing to do both?

This conundrum lies at the heart of Tony Abbott's political strategy. The Opposition Leader knows that while the ideas put up by governments must be coherent and considered to survive the inevitable scrutiny they will attract, there is no such obligation for arguments mounted by a government's critics.

Just as the Prime Minister's political strategy is simultaneously criticised for being too populist and not populist enough, the Opposition works hard to generate a stream of effective, if not coherent, criticisms of the Government's policy agenda.

On climate change the Opposition Leader claims that all of the costs of a carbon price will be passed on to consumers while simultaneously arguing that all of the costs will have to be absorbed by producers. It is nonsense to suggest that both can happen at once.

Similarly, he manages to successfully court the sceptics' vote while opposing a carbon price on the grounds that his more expensive "direct action" would be more effective at reducing emissions.

On asylum seekers he attacks the Government for not being tough enough but also for ignoring human rights. And on budget night he appealed to the popular press by declaring restrictions on middle class welfare to be a "class war" but when the legislation reached the Parliament he did not oppose it, allowing himself the opportunity to maintain his "fiscal conservative" credentials.

Put simply, Tony Abbott is walking both sides of more than a few streets. Such a strategy is proving quite effective, especially within a media environment in which the Prime Minister's "legitimacy" rather than the workability of various policy proposals is deemed to be "the story".

Nick Minchin, no fan of the carbon price, was recently critical of Tony Abbott's decision to oppose an increase in fuel excise on LPG that was originally proposed by the Howard government. He argued that the Opposition must support the introduction of good policy. Tony Abbott overruled him and argued that the pursuit of a simple "no new tax" message should take priority.

Tony Abbott has perfected the art of filling the 24/7 news cycle with new, if not coherent, correct or convincing, attacks against the Government. Yet it is the Prime Minister that is criticised for not believing in anything.

There is no doubt that Tony Abbott is an effective communicator and, to date, he has shown himself capable of keeping his team together, if not always on message. But while these are important qualifications for the top job, they are not nearly sufficient.

If Australia is to be able to divert some of the enormous windfall gains from the world's appetite for our natural resources into addressing the emerging challenges that we face then we will need leaders who are willing and able to make hard decisions, confront powerful opponents, and make an articulate and powerful case for reform to the voting public.

The mining industry has much to lose from the introduction of a carbon price and a mining tax and in turn its support for Tony Abbott should come as no surprise. But the thing that the mining industry says it needs most is certainty, and there is nothing less certain than the actions of a politician who is trying to walk both sides of the street.

How would the mining industry feel about a plebiscite on restoring the mining tax proposed by Ken Henry and spending the extra \$80billion dollars on health, education and middle-class tax cuts?

How would the finance industry feel about a plebiscite on the introduction of a tax on pointless financial speculation? And how would Australia's wealthiest people feel about asking the public whether we should introduce death duties on estates worth more than \$10million?

Tony Abbott is not working on plans to develop a better government for Australia; he is singularly focused on his plans to destroy this one.

In doing so he has the huge advantage that propositions are hard to develop while oppositions are easy to mount.

Of course the ALP shares much of the blame for the parlous state of politics, with its asylum seeker policy reeking of the kind of populism that Abbott is so keen to exploit.

But if we are to have a debate about the future of the country rather than the future of the polls then we have to look a bit deeper than which party's message is "cutting through" and focus instead on which party's policies have any chance of being implemented.

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