

**Poor judgement,
wrong values or
poor General?**



Poor judgement, wrong values or poor General?: How to explain decisions in Canberra.

Written by Rick Brown.

The clouds over Julia Gillard's values and political judgement have been getting darker since the 2010 Federal election campaign.

The latest issues including –

- the frog-marching of dual Olympic gold medalist Nova Peris into the senate;
- the decision to announce an election date seven months in advance;
- the time of that announcement; and
- the timing of the resignations of Senator Chris Evans and Nicola Roxon

have brought to the surface doubts and uncertainty about the Prime Minister which first emerged during that campaign.

It began when suddenly voters were told during that election campaign they were about to see the real Julia, implying that up until then, at least during the election campaign and presumably during her time as prime minister, the voters had seen a false Julia.

Then there were the post-election negotiations with the Greens and Independents in which the Prime Minister not only negotiated an agreement with the Greens but also had a formal ceremony formalising that agreement before she had tied up a sufficient number of Independents.

Among her supporters in Victoria there was incredulity. They believed that she was a person with values – traditional Labor values. Yet here she was debasing herself before the Greens, the representatives of inner-suburban, university graduates who had no compunction in promoting policies requiring the subsidies of traditional Labor voters through tax subsidies or the equivalent (e.g. alternative energy sources such as solar) to be viable.

Further there was not a need for this approach. The Greens, despite all the bluster, did not have anywhere else to go. Their supporters would dump them if they signed up with the Liberals. This approach called into question her political judgement.

Since then there have been those within Labor who have asked who is advising the Prime Minister or to

whom she listens. Others have written her off, assuming she is a prisoner of the handful of Right politicians, including Senator David Feeney whose connection with the Health Services Union is best not mentioned and former Senator Mark Arbib from the NSW Right, who took credit for orchestrating her ambush of Kevin Rudd. They have been scathing about the political skills of the NSW Right and have not been enamoured of Feeney and others.

Meanwhile the clouds have continued to get darker, which is why there is cause for the hopes of Rudd to spring eternal, regardless of the fact that he is loathed by a significant proportion of his parliamentary colleagues.

The effective execution of the strategy of making the next election a referendum on Tony Abbott in the latter part of last year calmed the seas, particularly after the flow-on effect of the enthusiastic response of the Twitter and chattering classes to the Abbott-is-a-misogynist line. However, even then there were risks. Would setting the bar so high come back to haunt the Prime Minister?

It did within weeks. A comedian made a defamatory joke at a union function through which Labor ministers, including the Treasurer Wayne Swan sat, without immediately protesting. Then, at the end of January, the Prime Minister's partner, Tim Matheson, found himself at the centre of a controversy over a joke about small, female, Asian doctors.

There was a timing issue also. Storm-trooper-type campaigns can be effective in the short term. One question, assuming that they are effective, is whether they can be sustained over a longer term and whether any immediate benefits can be maintained.

Thus it might be asked if the purpose of the misogyny line was to strike a permanent blow against Abbott or whether it was as much about shoring up the polls to keep another Rudd challenge at bay.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister continued to invite questioning about her political judgement by insisting that the Government would deliver a surplus this financial year as late as last December, when the dogs had been barking in the streets for a couple of months that it was impossible. Finally, on the eve of Christmas, the Government capitulated.

Thus, deciding whether the latest announcements are part of a well-executed plan or just the latest examples of political incompetence is anybody's guess. In Canberra the dominant feeling is one of bemusement.

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One explanation for the election campaign announcement is that it was designed to focus the public's attention on Abbott and that it would force the Coalition to announce policy and costings. The problem is that a Government announcement cannot force the Opposition to do anything and that voters are not going to focus on an election seven months out.

Another explanation is that it was designed to head off another Rudd challenge. Ask Bill Hayden, who was ambushed by Bob Hawke a month before election day in 1983. Further, if it were true, it would demonstrate how insecure the Prime Minister feels given that there was not any talk about a second Rudd challenge. Since she made the announcement there has been.

Then there is the timing of the announcement which came a couple of days after the shoe-horning of Nova Peris into a Senate seat, dispatching a current female Senator to the unemployment queues in the process and without consulting either the current Senator or Labor Party members in the Northern Territory.

The reason the Prime Minister gave was that she feels it is imperative that Labor has an Aboriginal woman in the Senate and it is logical that the senator represent the Northern Territory. The problem is that at least one Aboriginal woman who was a former member of the Territory Assembly had nominated for that Senate position. Thus it appears that the Prime Minister doesn't want any Aboriginal woman, but *her* Aboriginal woman.

A question is why the election announcement was made a couple of days after Labor's National Executive acceded to the Prime Minister's demand if she thought this move was a political plus – or was the timing of the election announcement an admission that Prime Minister's move had backfired with widespread opposition to her high-handed action in the Northern Territory.

Any strategy behind the election announcement was undermined by the announcement the following day that the Victorian Police were laying 150 charges against the former Health Services Union national secretary and former Labor MP Craig Thomson. The Prime Minister's supporters put this misfortune down to an act of God, but it had been necessary only to read the newspapers to know that the laying of charges was not far away. What difference would waiting a couple of weeks have made?

Then there was the announcement of the resignations of Government Senate leader Chris Evans and Attorney-General Nicola Roxon a couple days after the election announcement and the Craig Thomson story. Again the question: why then?

According to the Prime Minister she had known about the intentions of Evans and Roxon for about 12 months. There had been talk about Evans' wanting to move on, but not Roxon. It would seem that either the Prime Minister knew about Ms. Roxon's intentions when she appointed her Attorney-General or that Ms. Roxon had decided she wanted a change in lifestyle. Either way there are questions: why did the Prime Minister appoint her Attorney-General knowing what she knew or did Roxon accept the appointment?

The Prime Minister said it would not have been appropriate to make changes before Christmas because that would have meant that Senator Evans's position as Government leader in the Senate would have been vacant until Parliament resumed. However that explanation is not persuasive.

Another theory which has been floated is that the Prime Minister wanted neither a re-shuffle nor any elections late last year for fear of creating the opportunity for another Rudd challenge, even though there was not any talk of one, and her strategy of branding Abbott a misogynist appeared to be paying political dividends. If that theory were true, it would pose serious questions.

There is another explanation for the timing of the two resignations. Evans, notwithstanding his position, appears not to have been consulted about the announcing of the election date. Nor is he likely to have been consulted about the Nova Peris move. Perhaps he decided that he had had enough and resigned before he needed to.

Presumably Roxon, who was one of the Prime Minister's attack dogs during the Rudd challenge, also was not consulted about the election announcement. Further, she looked set to carry responsibility for the outcry against the proposed anti-discrimination legislation. Maybe, following Evans's announcement, she decided that she did not owe the Prime Minister anything and decided to follow suit.

Lying behind this history of one poor call after another is a more fundamental question. Armies are familiar with the reality that sometimes good colonels do not make good generals and that one does not really know until after the colonel puts his or her feet under the general's desk.

The unpalatable thought for Labor and the disastrous thought for the Prime Minister is that she is a good colonel.

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