Rudd vs Abbott people's forum: experts respond

Tom Clark
Victoria University

David Holmes
Monash University

David Maguire
Murdoch University

Denis Muller
The University Of Melbourne

Fabrizio Carmignani
Griffith University

See next page for additional authors
Rudd vs Abbott people's forum: experts respond

Abstract
Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott have met in a "town hall" style leaders' debate at the Broncos Leagues Club in Brisbane.

Abbott and Rudd took questions from an audience of 100 undecided voters on issues from public service cuts, industrial relations, the environment and asylum seekers.

In his closing statements, Rudd pointed to Queensland state premier Campbell Newman breaking his promise not to cut public service jobs, as a harbinger of what would face Australia if an Abbott government were elected.

Keywords
experts, forum, respond, people, rudd, abbott, vs

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Authors
Tom Clark, David Holmes, David Maguire, Denis Muller, Fabrizio Carmignani, Joseph Fernandez, Marcus O'Donnell, and Sean Rintel
21 August 2013, 8.15pm AEST

Rudd vs Abbott people’s forum: experts respond

Authors

1. Tom Clark
   Senior Lecturer in Communication at Victoria University

2. David Holmes
   Senior Lecturer, Communications and Media Studies at Monash University

3. David Maguire
   Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Management at Murdoch University

4. Denis Muller
   Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Advancing Journalism at University of Melbourne
5. **Fabrizio Carmignani**  
Associate Professor, Griffith Business School at Griffith University

6. **Joseph Fernandez**  
Head of Department, Journalism at Curtin University

7. **Marcus O'Donnell**  
Lecturer, Program Convenor, Journalism at University of Wollongong

8. **Sean Rintel**  
Lecturer in Strategic Communication at University of Queensland

**Disclosure Statement**

The authors do not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article. They also have no relevant affiliations.
Provides funding as a **Founding Partner** of The Conversation.

unimelb.edu.au

Provides funding as a **Member** of The Conversation.

curtin.edu.au

Provides funding as a **Member** of The Conversation.

griffith.edu.au

Provides funding as a **Member** of The Conversation.

murdock.edu.au

Provides funding as a **Founding Partner** of The Conversation.

monash.edu.au

Provides funding as a **Member** of The Conversation.

uow.edu.au

Provides funding as a **Member** of The Conversation.

vu.edu.au
Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott have faced off in a second debate - this time, a ‘people’s forum’ in front of 100 undecided voters. AAP/Lukas Coch

Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott have met in a “town hall” style leaders’ debate at the Broncos Leagues Club in Brisbane.

Abbott and Rudd took questions from an audience of 100 undecided voters on issues from public service cuts, industrial relations, the environment and asylum seekers.

In his closing statements, Rudd pointed to Queensland state premier Campbell Newman breaking his promise not to cut public service jobs, as a harbinger of what would face Australia if an Abbott government were elected.

Abbott asked the audience - and watching voters - if they felt Australia could afford another three years of ALP government, claiming to have been a “competent and trustworthy” senior minister in a “competent and trustworthy” Howard government.

It is expected there will be one more encounter between the leaders in a public forum before the September 7 election.

The Conversation had a panel of experts watching and analysing the forum. Their responses follow.
Tom Clark, Senior Lecturer in Communication at Victoria University

Careful what you pray for! After the first encounter ten nights ago, many complained the format produced “no real debate,” too little critical engagement between the speakers, a lack of good old biff and tangle.

Tonight we got the B side of the cassette: tedious bickering about each other’s untrustworthy opinions on side-issues. Forty minutes in, they had only managed to dispute their way through opposed non-answers to six audience questions.

Rudd was much more energetic than last time, though, and Abbott was conspicuously nastier. At one stage he openly slagged: “Does this guy ever shut up?” Not that he forsook his own chance to squeeze a comment in immediately afterwards.

Given the dysfunctionality of the conversation, the vagueness of the arguments exchanged, it is those personality impressions that will stay with people from this debate. So it is a points victory for the incumbent prime minister tonight. He needs more of them, and bigger ones, in the days ahead.

Denis Muller, Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Advancing Journalism at University of Melbourne

It had a far more genuinely democratic feel than the National Press Club debate, which felt like the old pollies-and-journos club having a boring exchange in a suitably dimly lit room. This debate, in a brightly lit forum with people in hi-vis jackets and jumpers flung over their shoulders, felt real. The absence of lecterns brought the leaders closer to the audience and added to the conversational nature of the exchange. Abbott in particular seemed to open up in this less formal setting.

What was also clear, from watching the on-screen representation of viewers' reactions in the form of the “worm”, was the voters detest negativity. This was evident when Abbott or Rudd bagged the other side. By contrast, when the leaders were civil with each other, their worm line went up. It was also clear that Labor had more credibility on climate change, and the immediate reaction of the worm suggested that this is still a very live issue. However, Rudd really scored with his commitment to marriage equality and his undertaking to bring in legislation early in the life of the new parliament. This too appears to have high salience among voters.

Rudd’s closing remarks also rated consistently well. Abbott’s was also well received but showed little dips every time he went negative.

Sean Rintel, Lecturer in Strategic Communication at University of Queensland
As Kevin Rudd responded to a follow-up during the debate, a frustrated Tony Abbott asked: “does this guy ever shut up?”

The #auspol and #ausvotes Twitter users reacted in interesting manners. At first, in a somewhat unusual fashion, many Twitter users treated this a breach of respect towards Kevin Rudd and “conduct unbecoming” of a potential PM to be. For example:

@es_awesome: “Abbott told the PM to shut up? Does he have any sense of propriety?”

@clare1mb: “The real @TonyAbbottMHR emerges…”

@TheAviator1992: “Abbott "Does this guy never shut up!" WHAT A DISGRACE!!!”

In response, Abbott supporters attempted to turn the reason for Abbott’s comment into a problem for Rudd. For example:

@kaylenegerster: “No I will not shut up folks. I will waffle on with BS as long as I want @KRuddMP”

But then the concept of Abbott telling famous people to shut up began to be the focus of snarky comment. For example:

@peterjhinton: “Abbott meeting Chancellor Angela Merkel "does this sheila ever shut up?! laughs”

Other famous figures included the Dalai Lama, Barack Obama, and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Finally, Twitter users started to retweet the ABC’s video moment in which Kevin Rudd retorted to “shut up” that such a response was “standard debating technique”. So, in terms of “duelling memes”, it would appear that Rudd won the day in the first people’s forum.

David Holmes, Senior Lecturer, Communications and Media Studies at Monash University

“It’s not about journalists tonight, but it’s about you the people,” was Sky News Australia political editor and forum presenter David Speers’ opener as he pointed out that a people’s forum with both leaders present was a first for an election campaign in Australia.

Some anticipated that this debate might have be risky for either leader without a controlled studio situation. But the 100 invitees solicited by Galaxy Research were very restrained, and it was much more of a Q&A style of exchange, where the audience questions were pre-solicited, wide-ranging and orderly.

There were few pans to the audience to monitor reactions and no spontaneity or political emotion from the audience as the entire room listened attentively. The only flare-up was an intervention by Abbott to Rudd “does this guy ever shut up” at the 30 minute mark, which drew laughter from the audience, after which Rudd retorted: “we are having a discussion, mate”.
Rudd looked uncomfortable in his opening address but less so in critique of Abbott, such as on the question of whether a Coalition government would make cuts to health and other services, where he had command of the figures (this time without notes). Although Abbott was more frequently called to account he had a self-confident style, but Rudd had the arguments on the night. For example, Abbott presented himself as bush-loving conservationist, while Rudd convincingly explained that no environmental progress could be made without addressing climate change.

Rudd’s closing critique of the Queensland Newman government was a clever pitch to turn around polling in Brisbane seats, and suggest that Abbott’s promises were as trustworthy as Newman’s were before he was swept into power. Abbott, ran through his signature policies, and that they would be delivered by a strong “trustworthy government”: a government that “says what it means, and does what it says.”

Fabrizio Carmignani, Associate Professor, Griffith Business School at Griffith University

It was an interesting debate, with a good variety of questions that covered some of the critical dimensions of the policy space. I had the impression that the strategy chosen by the two leaders in this debate reflected their respective position in the polls. Rudd is behind and therefore must attack.

Accordingly, he tried to challenge and put Abbot under pressure quite aggressively, especially at the beginning. Abbot, instead, stuck to his script, knowing that with his current lead in the polls the most important thing is to avoid big mistakes. Nevertheless, I think that Rudd tonight won. In particular, he managed to expose what is probably the main weakness of the Coalition: the lack of clarity on future budgetary decisions. The discussion on how to finance the parental leave plan is a clear example: Abbot was substantially unable or unwilling to provide details on how the full cost of the initiative would be covered.

More generally, Rudd was successful in stressing that the Coalition advances proposals that involve significant budget cuts and/or reallocation of resources, but it does not say exactly what is going to be cut. Given the precedent of the Newman government in Queensland, this is indeed something voters should be worried about.

David Maguire, Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Management at Murdoch University

You can’t fight Mr Rudd on showmanship and Mr Abbott didn’t try to when the PM came out strong, pumped, animated and well in command of his non-verbal behavior. He seemed intent on executing an in-your-face strategy, at one point quite literally.

Abbott looked stilted in comparison as a result. He maintained the cool, calm and collected approach up to when he asked in the early stages of question time: “does this guy ever shut-up?”
But after the initial flourishes, the two settled back into a more measured engagement, with more playing of the policy and strategy ball rather than the man. There was no knockout blow and no surprises in their answers to the wide range of questions. They traded tit-for-tat attacks on the records of previous governments and trotted out policy sound bites.

This was a more relaxed format and more conducive to the leaders displaying a modicum of personality, resulting in better viewing.

---

**Marcus O'Donnell, Lecturer, Program Convenor, Journalism at University of Wollongong**

There was nothing surprising in this debate that enlightened us on our electoral choices. So once again it came down to how it felt.

But maybe it’s a game changer, by virtue of not changing the game, and the game being a lot harder to change after this half way point.

Rudd really need this to be a breakthrough moment and it didn’t happen. He got no real traction even though he went hard at Abbott and demanded: What are you going to cut?

The PM had some good moments (“put your hands up if you earn $150,000?”) where he really connected with the audience, but too often he looked uncomfortable and antsy. Abbott remained calm and looked surprisingly at ease.

Political strategist and former Blair and Gillard adviser John McTernan wrote yesterday that the election was a choice of two futures:

Kevin Rudd has to project a clear picture of Australia’s future with Labor….Parties of the centre-left can only win with a compelling vision based on future and fairness.

This was the hymn Rudd opened with and came back to with a final chorus but for much of the night he was trying desperately to score his points by attacking Abbott’s policies. Abbott didn’t get tripped up.

---

**Joseph Fernandez, Head of Department, Journalism at Curtin University**

Rather oddly, the scorecard for the people’s forum with the prime minister Kevin Rudd and opposition leader Tony Abbott dealt a verdict in which a non-party to the debate – journalists – came out losers.

As Mr Abbott put it: “People One, Journos Nil”.

That remark drew this lament on the SMH’s live feed on the debate: “How very hurtful for us reptiles of the press”.

---
Unlike interrogation by journalists, however, the questions from the audience were predictable, covering planned cuts to public services, handouts to businesses, the paid parental leave scheme, the planned tax on savings deposits, WorkChoices, asylum seeker policy, environmental protection, 457 visas, housing affordability, and same sex marriage.

One question that broke the mould, however, concerned the poor calibre of some of the candidates fielded by the parties. Both leaders conceded this was a valid question.

While this point is not at the forefront of election concerns in this campaign it merits close consideration.