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### BLOG: Petty politics overshadows policy

Anthony Ashbolt

*University of Wollongong*, [aashbolt@uow.edu.au](mailto:aashbolt@uow.edu.au)

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## BLOG: Petty politics overshadows policy

### Abstract

The coming federal election is already highlighting aspects of Australian politics that are cause for concern. The "mock menu" (which initially was thought to be for a Liberal Party fundraising dinner) with its vulgar and demeaning reference to our Prime Minister is not only ample confirmation of Julia Gillard's argument about misogyny but also a further signal of the decline of civility in Australian political life. When school children see it as somehow natural to throw sandwiches at the Prime Minister, we can sense this decline vividly. The media are partly responsible for this, whipping up hysteria around all sorts of issues that should be debated clearly and calmly. One only needs to think of the media treatment of infrastructure programs like the home insulation and school building schemes to see the way a distorted picture emerges.

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# ILLAWARRA MERCURY

Friday June 14, 2013

## **BLOG: Petty politics overshadows policy**

By *ANTHONY ASHBOLT*



*Today we introduce University of Wollongong senior lecturer in politics Dr Anthony Ashbolt, who has joined the Illawarra Mercury's election team to provide expert commentary in the lead-up to September 14.*

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infrastructure programs like the home insulation and school building schemes to see the way a distorted picture emerges.

The positive aspects of these programs are buried under a heap of negative publicity. Even the National Broadband Network, which should be a huge plus for the Government, has become tarnished with the brush of asbestos, as if the Government was somehow responsible for the asbestos that permeates our communities.

Yet it is not just a matter of media bias. For we also have a Government that seems incapable of selling its policies. And here we come to a sad fact about contemporary politics.

It has become another branch of the public relations industry, where marketing techniques, opinion polling, focus groups and political consultants predominate and political parties are branded.

The negative effects of this can be seen in the removal of Rudd in his first term supposedly as a consequence of a dive in the polls. They can also be seen in the ability of a slogan or sound bite to capture the national mood in the way serious policy analysis cannot. Thus “Stop the Boats” becomes a saleable mantra but an outline of the benefits of a national broadband scheme sends people to sleep.

Politics thereby becomes cheapened and the incivility referred to earlier thrives. Moreover, a focus on leadership turns into a media obsession with leadership, so that significant debates about policy get buried.

We should all be thinking about economic policy, education policy and health policy, to specify just a few major areas of concern.

Instead, the question is whether Rudd will replace Gillard and all because of lousy opinion polls. Now most of the polls do have Labor in an unwinnable position (hovering around the low 30s but Essential this week had Labor at 36%). Brand Labor contributes to this by falling apart before our eyes. The lack of discipline and cohesion in an election year is breathtaking and whether a return to Rudd would necessarily bring the Party together is questionable. It is true that he is a more effective political campaigner than Gillard but there are perhaps too many within caucus and particularly within the frontbench who could not swallow their pride if Rudd were to return.

In New Matilda this week Ben Eltham outlined three scenarios – Julia Gillard remains as Prime Minister, Rudd replaces Gillard or another, entirely new, leader emerges. Whatever the scenario, he suggested Labor loses and “loses big”.

<http://newmatilda.com/2013/06/11/choose-your-own-labor-disaster>)

He has a point and the problem is not just one of Gillard’s making. There are structural problems within the Labor Party, problems that can only be resolved with the type of reforms advocated by Faulkner, Bracks and Carr. Yet the real problem with the Labor Party today is that it has lost its soul and sense of direction. To put it bluntly, the light on the hill has been turned off. The crisis of leadership within Labor is partly a reflection of this.

And that brings me back to the decline of civility in politics. Ever since Labor luminaries turned on Mark Latham in a very nasty way after the party lost the 2004 election (and this was at a time when he was seriously ill), the leader of the party has been eventually subjected to abuse by those who were once close colleagues.

Latham, admittedly, hurled the abuse back and is still at it today. Yet the bile and hatred is returned regularly.

Labor MP Anthony Byrne recently told a parliamentary committee that Tony Abbott was “the least qualified opposition leader to talk about matters of national security since Mark Latham”.

Presumably this was a reference to the fact that Latham did not kneel at the altar of American foreign policy. Now there’s an issue that should be central to the election but bi-partisan support (unquestioning support) for the American alliance ensures that it will not be. One looks forward to the day when a new Jim Cairns or Tom Uren will emerge but that is highly unlikely. Their colleagues would trash them as traitors.

Look at the vitriolic slamming Rudd received from so many frontbenchers before his leadership challenge. The whole idea of comradeship seems to have departed and leaders have become the marionettes of factional warlords. Thus it is that Julia Gillard can preach a feminist message and at the same time support David Feeney (one of the warlords who helped install her) as Labor candidate for Batman.

It is little wonder then that the people have stopped listening. Labor has had at least a few good stories to tell, including a very important one about how its infrastructure spending helped make our economy resilient.

One of the reasons it cannot tell that story in a convincing fashion is precisely because it has its mind elsewhere – on opinion polls and leadership and media speculation.

***Dr Anthony Ashbolt is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wollongong. He specialises in American politics and history but has taught and written about Australian politics and media politics for many years.***

*He is the main editor of the labour history journal, Illawarra Unity (<http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/>) and the author of A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013); [www.pickeringchatto.com/sixties](http://www.pickeringchatto.com/sixties). He is also co-author (with colleague Glenn Mitchell) of a chapter in the recently published Red Strains: Music and Communism outside the Communist Bloc (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780197265390.do#.UbkvFDurzJw> Many of his other publications can be found at Research Online at the University of Wollongong [http://ro.uow.edu.au/do/search/?q=author\\_lname%3A%22Ashbolt%22%20AND%20author\\_fname%3A%22Anthony%22&...](http://ro.uow.edu.au/do/search/?q=author_lname%3A%22Ashbolt%22%20AND%20author_fname%3A%22Anthony%22&...)*