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BLOG: Costings become a guessing game

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Abstract

Labor's "Gotcha" moment seemed to have backfired badly with Treasury and Finance Secretaries, together with the head of the Parliamentary Budget Office, distancing their units from claims about a \$10 billion black hole. Labor's advice from these Departments was provided with regard to policies outlined prior to the period of caretaker Government. Rather than point to a specific mistake related to earlier policy calculations, Labor could have just kept hammering the point about costings in general. Nonetheless, as Crikey correspondent Bernard Keane observed: "I'm of the view that the costings imbroglio doesn't matter a jot: voters are aware that the Coalition has dodgy form on costings, and they're prepared to back it anyway."

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By ANTHONY ASHBOLT Aug. 30, 2013, 10 p.m.



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Nonetheless, as Crikey correspondent Bernard Keane observed: "I'm of the view that the costings imbroglio doesn't matter a jot: voters are aware that the Coalition has dodgy form on costings, and they're prepared to back it anyway.

The press gallery misinterpreted and wildly overhyped the alleged 'slapdown' of Labor from the secretaries of Treasury and Finance and the head of the Parliamentary Budget Office, and in any event it merely begs the question of why we're all playing guessing games about the Coalition's costings."

Guessing games might have some point but allegations of "fraud" over-step the mark. Labor's claims about costings will fall on deaf ears from now on.

They probably did anyway, as Keane suggests, and a number of other commentators have also observed that people stopped taking notice of the campaign a while ago.

Why? Partly because the media have not only failed to subject policies to proper scrutiny but also have, to a remarkable degree, focused upon weaknesses in Labor style and strategy while viewing the Opposition through the positive lens of Abbott's daughters or his fitness in military training programmes or his photo-op with a Sydney school's netball team (going over two pages of the Sydney Morning Herald).

So, with regard to the debate on Wednesday night, Rudd's criticism of the Opposition for planning to do away with the Clean Energy Finance Corporation or his questioning of Abbott's promised cuts to policies favouring small business received virtually no publicity.

The politics of renewable energy and small business take a back seat to the politics of personal presentation. And the politics of personal presentation includes the Abbott image of stability contrasted with Labor's apparent mayhem. So Abbott drives home the point that the caucus had so much faith in Rudd that it got rid of him and eventually so much faith in Gillard it got rid of her. No matter how much Rudd appeals to the process of democratic decision-making and finally party reform and renewal, it does look like tribal warfare gone mad. This is a problem of Labor's making and takes us back to the fateful decision by power brokers within Labor to install Gillard before the end of Labor's first term. Such monumental stupidity will haunt Labor for years and necessarily shape its ability to campaign effectively. Was Rudd ever going to be able to re-establish his authority given that historical context?

It remains, however, the case that Rudd has failed to live up to the image of a campaigner he once had and not all of this can be laid at the feet of the saboteurs who undermined him initially. He has scrambled around, picking some policies out of the air and failed to pursue vigorously and consistently the positive policies Labor does have in the fields of education, broadband, renewable energy and carbon pricing. With regard to carbon pricing, it is almost a matter of "Don't mention the war" as Rudd almost capitulates to the denialism dynamic unleashed by News Limited and, to some degree, the Opposition.

Perhaps the highlight of the campaign came on The Drum (ABC 2) when Malcolm Turnbull,

being questioned about his leader and climate change, noted that Tony was “an intelligent sceptic”.

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One suspects Turnbull recognised his observation was oxymoronic. Then he remarked with a twinkle in his eye that Abbott was a great believer in science, paused and added, with a further twinkle, “particularly political science”.

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 will be blogging for the Mercury on the Federal election campaign. He is the main editor of the labour history journal Illawarra Unity and the author of A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013). 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). Many of his other publications can be found at Research Online at the University of Wollongong.

BLOG: Australia's rude, crude election debate (<http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1726660/blog-australias-rude-crude-election-debate/?cs=2315>)

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