

Part 4: Pre-election comment

The campaign that never ended

Shaun Carney
Monash University
5 August 2013

It is an exquisitely portentous cliché, the one that is always trotted out at each Australian election: this is the most important election in a generation, or since World War Two, or the advent of television, or the fall of communism, or whatever.

In truth, each election is merely the most important election since the last one. What else could it be, given how short our election cycle is? We have so many elections in Australia and it seems politics now is little more than an endless campaign.

We can frame the 2013 election as a personal battle between leaders, in which case we can say that it is three-and-a-half years late: the belated contest with Tony Abbott that Kevin Rudd shied away from in the late summer of 2010, setting off a cascade of events that led to Julia Gillard's rise, her ill-judged rush to the polls in August 2010, and the hung parliament.

But this election will be about much more than the leaders. They will be central to the campaign, of course. Indeed, with an easily distracted and discomfited national electorate, a fractious media that is seeing its established ways of reporting and making profits collapsing, and only a laughably minuscule proportion of voters belonging to the parties, increased levels of personalisation seem to be inevitable. After all, it's the easiest way to understand the choice that we will have to make on September 7.

But something bigger than the careers of two ambitious men will be at stake when the people cast their votes. The Australian

political system itself is as much a candidate at this election as anybody whose name will be on the ballot paper. The system is under very heavy strain. The 2010 election campaign was a dreadful experience. The Labor government had shocked itself and the community with its defenestration of Rudd. Was Gillard running against the memory of Rudd as well as Abbott? At times the whole thing seemed absurd. Gillard and Abbott voluntarily placed themselves in rhetorical straitjackets all the way to election day.

Faced with superficial lines, tricked up public appearances, advertising that would insult the intelligence of an eight-year-old, and wild deviations by both sides on what was then a central issue — how to deal with climate change — they responded in kind. They refused to reward either Labor or the Coalition with a lower house majority. In turn, many voters very quickly became appalled at their handiwork. Having created a hung parliament, they almost reflexively despised the very concept of a minority government.

Perhaps reflecting the very human trait of optimism, the 2010 contest has been seen as an outlier, a glitch, an extreme example of political dysfunction that will lead to a sensible recalibration by the leaders, their advisers, the parties, the big pressure groups and the media.

In other words, we'll all wake up to ourselves and do it right this time. Well, maybe.

The parties' focus group research turns up a strong desire among many voters for a better politics. Clearly, Rudd has sought to play to this sensibility with his calls for Abbott to desert his "relentlessly negative, personalised approach". But focus groups produce a plethora of responses and sentiments, including a desire among a substantial proportion of voters to draw a line under the Labor government of 2007–13, to be done with the whole soap opera, and for the nation to start anew. Armed with this knowledge, Abbott has not dropped his hard

negativity at all. He does not feel that he needs to. It has been his engine ever since he took over as leader in December 2009.

This election campaign begins with the public knowing little more about the Coalition's policy plans than it did three years ago. Many of its key policy planks are built around what it won't do. It used to oppose the National Broadband Network but now it will accept it, just not in the expansive form Labor intends. It will support the Fair Work system, with some tweaks, but it won't reintroduce WorkChoices. Having for months derided Labor's schools spending plan as a con, it decided late last week that it would not overturn Labor's funding agreements with the states.

The entire thrust of the Coalition's approach is that it is the safe pair of hands because that's how a majority of voters came to see the Howard government. It is a message less of hope than of comfort, not so much a harnessing of the imagination than a retreat to a more stable time.

This is a powerful message in a system that has so few Australians directly engaged in political activity. The national electorate appears to be highly suggestible. For much of the time that Gillard faced off against Abbott, opinion polls regularly showed that voters would prefer to have Rudd opposing Malcolm Turnbull.

But in 2008–09, that's what they had until they turned first on Turnbull over his misjudgement in the Utegate affair and then, in the first half of 2010, against Rudd over his decision to defer an emissions trading scheme. Having helped to dispatch both leaders, voters switched to wanting them back.

Another example: a majority of voters favoured action on climate change for a considerable period, but once the hard work of fashioning a policy in the parliament got difficult, support fell away. As we know, the carbon price was the policy arsenic that ultimately killed Gillard's standing with voters.

How can this happen? In a relatively short period, a range of supporting mechanisms within our system have started to dissolve. Party membership is, increasingly, an unappealing prospect. The mass media no longer sees the explanation of policies and ideas as a central part of its charter. As it finds itself having to chase eyeballs in order to keep its financial head above water, it becomes more sensational, more attracted to portraying conflict and dealing with what public figures say rather than what they believe or do. The parties go along with this new model by ramping up the hyperbole.

At the same time, what we now call “stakeholders” are finding it easier to assert greater direct influence on political outcomes and the public mind. The ACTU’s Your Rights At Work campaign against WorkChoices in 2006–07 was one example. The big mining companies’ mid-2010 attack on Labor’s resource rent tax was another. That advertising campaign was so effective that it helped to end Rudd’s first prime ministership and cruelled any chance Gillard had of fashioning an effective policy. Both of these campaigns attracted considerable public sympathy, if not outright support.

This is politics in contemporary Australia — a system that values announcements and pronouncements, denunciation and stark oppositionism, eschewing almost entirely sensible discussion and consideration of ideas on their merits.

It is in this environment that the 2013 election, definitely the most important election until the next one, is being contested.

Murdoch and his influence on Australian political life

David McKnight

University of New South Wales

7 August 2013

In 2007, journalist Ken Auletta spent a great deal of time with Rupert Murdoch while writing a magazine profile of him. Auletta observed that Murdoch was frequently on the phone to his editors and this prompted him to ask: “Of all the things in your business empire, what gives you the most pleasure?” Murdoch instantly replied: “being involved with the editor of a paper in a day-to-day campaign ... trying to influence people”.

Over the course of the 2013 federal election, Australia will experience a real-time experiment that will demonstrate the degree of influence exerted by Rupert Murdoch and his newspapers on Australian political life.

That Murdoch has had an influence on elections previously, especially in the United Kingdom, is no secret. In the 1992 UK election, *The Sun*, his biggest selling tabloid in the United Kingdom and editorially a kissing cousin of Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*, claimed victory on behalf of the Conservative party. As the headline famously bellowed: “It Was The Sun Wot Won It”.

Could we see “It’s The Tele Wot Won It” on the morning of September 8?

On Day One of the campaign (the Monday just gone), the *Daily Telegraph* staked a claim for the most thuggish headline: “KICK THIS MOB OUT”. Two days earlier the *Daily Telegraph*’s headline was “PRICE OF LABOR: Another huge budget shambles”.

The headlines underlined the fact that when he chooses to, Murdoch uses his newspapers ruthlessly to make or break governments or parties. Given that he controls 70% of the capital

city newspaper circulation in Australia, his moods and beliefs are a material factor during elections in Australia. Prime ministers and opposition leaders seek his favours but are grateful if they can just have his neutrality.

Political leaders do this because they have a keen sense of where raw power lies in election campaigns. They know that in the crucial state of Queensland that Murdoch's *Courier-Mail* reigns supreme. In Adelaide, *The Advertiser* has no rival. In NSW and Victoria, he has the powerhouses of the *Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph*.

After the 2010 election — which resulted in a minority Labor government — Murdoch summoned his Australian editors and senior journalists to his home in Carmel, California. He made clear that he despised the Gillard government and wanted regime change. In 2011, Murdoch met Abbott and told his editors he liked him. His newspapers (a couple of which had actually supported Gillard in the 2010 election) thereafter campaigned strongly against the Gillard government, particularly on the issues of asylum seekers and climate change.

Some regard newspapers as dinosaurs, but this is mistaken in my view. Newspapers continue to set a daily agenda, particularly in politics. They are responsible for the majority of online news, which in turn feeds blogs and social media. Radio and television feed off newspaper coverage, creating an echo chamber, particularly in small state capitals. During election campaigns, the day begins at 4.00 am when the party strategists review the morning's newspapers and plan their campaign.

The arrival in Australia of *New York Post* editor Col Allan has aroused much comment. Allan is a radically conservative editor whose newspaper led the charge against Barack Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. Allan is a loyal lieutenant of Rupert Murdoch's and is particularly close to Lachlan Murdoch.

The reason for Murdoch's dramatic intervention in the current election has caused some debate. One interpretation of Murdoch is that he acts only for commercial advantage. Reflecting this, Paul Sheehan in the *Sun-Herald* argued that Murdoch wants to destroy Rudd and Labor because they are building the National Broadband Network (NBN). The NBN's capacity to allow the quick downloading of movies and other content would be a threat to Murdoch's Foxtel TV operation, so the argument goes.

Whether true or not, this underestimates Murdoch and reduces him to a comic book capitalist. If commercial advantage was Murdoch's real measure of success, he would have closed newspapers like *The Australian*, London's *The Times* and the *New York Post* many years ago. All lose money. *The Australian*, for example, which lectures the nation about the need for a level playing field and free markets, is reportedly subsidised to the tune of A\$25–30 million for its losses per year. *The New York Post* has never made money under Murdoch. *The Times* has been in the red for many years.

Murdoch's personal politics are more ideological than most people think. His pick for US president last year was Rick Santorum. Murdoch praised his "vision" for the country — yet Santorum opposed birth control and wanted to ban abortion. At one stage, four of the likely contenders for the Republican nomination were on his payroll as commentators on Fox News.

In Australia, Murdoch's newspapers — subsidised or not — give him a seat at the table of national politics. From this position he is determined to exercise the kind of influence that he was honest enough to admit to Ken Auletta.

She's got it: Responses to Tony Abbott's "sex appeal" comments

Ngairé Donaghue

Murdoch University

16 August 2013

Since opposition leader Tony Abbott's self-described "daggy dad" comments about Liberal candidate Fiona Scott's sex appeal, gender issues have re-emerged in Australian politics.

Labor frontbenchers claim that these comments reveal what Abbott "really thinks" about women, and cite it as evidence that he is stuck in the past — "a 20th century man".

But beyond their immediate use for point scoring in the election campaign, responses to Abbott's remarks reveal some of the complex and competing elements of how sexism is responded to in Australian social life.

Response #1: Deny any problem

The woman at the centre of the storm, Fiona Scott, has dismissed any concerns about Abbott's reference to her "sex appeal", calling it a "charming compliment". Former sex discrimination commissioner turned NSW state Liberal MP Pru Goward has also downplayed its significance, saying that "a lot of politicians are described as sexy". So what's the problem?

To be sure, the "sex appeal" comment is a far cry from some of Abbott's earlier observations about gender, including his notorious claims that women are physiologically less suited to leadership than men, and that abortion is "the easy way out".

But this kind of thing does matter. It reinforces views about gender that are detrimental to women in political and public life. Women in politics get a short-term boost to their likeability and "relatability" from being seen to be "a good sport", but this often comes at a cost to their perceived credibility. It also perpetuates

long-standing gender stereotypes that relegate women to primary roles as decorative and attractive helpmates to the real protagonists: naturally assumed to be men.

Response #2: Ignore it and move on

The initial response from Labor was to play a straight bat, with Labor HQ issuing a statement that “Mr Abbott’s comments are entirely a matter for Mr Abbott”.

Although the remark has since been condemned by several senior Labor figures, including prime minister Kevin Rudd, Anthony Albanese, Kim Carr and Penny Wong, ALP front-bencher Kate Ellis reflects the caution of many women about calling out sexism. Ellis reportedly declined to comment on the sexism allegation, tweeting that she had heard “loud and clear” the message that voters “want focus on THEIR issues”.

This apparent wariness about being “derailed” by sexism reflects a reality in which women are often penalised for calling out instances of sexism experienced or witnessed by them. Researchers have found that women who make complaints of sexism are often seen as unlikeable troublemakers, especially by men.

One of the reasons that former prime minister Julia Gillard’s misogyny speech was greeted with such excitement was that it seemed to open more possibilities for women to speak out about sexism in their own lives. Reluctance of public figures to speak out against sexist remarks, as understandable and strategic as it may be, creates a climate that makes it harder for women to protest instances of sexism in their workplaces and private lives.

Response #3: Try a gender reversal

Another minimising response to sexism is to suggest that men experience sexism too, or that they wouldn’t mind if they did. Witness Liberal MP Christopher Pyne’s “wish [that] people would describe [him] as having sex appeal”, or Amanda Vanstone’s claim that women frequently comment on how “nicely men are packed”.

This simplistic gender reversal analysis fails to take into account that comments about appearance and desirability are made in a social context that emphasises the centrality of these attributes to women's identities. Women are objectified — seen as objects to be judged in terms of beauty and desirability — to a far greater extent than men, and with more far-reaching consequences.

Comments such as Abbott's legitimise this kind of attention in a sphere where it is entirely unwarranted.

Response #4: Accuse others of (wilful) misunderstanding

Finally, a frequent response to allegations of sexism is to suggest that those who are offended have simply misunderstood, misinterpreted, or over-reacted to the speaker's true intention. For example, many senior figures in the Liberal party have rushed to defend Abbott, stating that his comments were "largely in jest", "clearly light-hearted", and "not offensive". Former prime minister John Howard has weighed in to suggest that "the reaction of some people who tut-tutted about it is out of proportion and ridiculous".

It seems fair to assume that Abbott did not intend to demean Scott. She is, after all, a candidate from his own party, and he was attending the event to extol her virtues. The remark has many similarities to US president Barack Obama's "endorsement" of Kamala Harris as "by far, the best looking attorney-general".

But intention is not the key issue. These kinds of comments have serious consequences for both the individual woman involved and for women in public life more generally. Pervasive gender stereotypes mean that women are already fighting a battle to be seen as potential leaders, and comments about traditionally feminine attributes, such as sex appeal, reduce the perceived competence and suitability of women for public office.

While president Obama later apologised for his remarks, Tony Abbott brushed off his comment as a harmless over-exuberant “daggy dad moment”.

Another word for “dad” is “patriarch”.

Don't these guys ever shut up? How Tony Abbott reignited the gender debate without realising it

Andy Ruddock
Monash University
22 August 2013

Opposition leader Tony Abbott seems to have done the job. Some judges reckon the Oxford boxing blue endured nothing worse than a split decision points loss. Others credit him with delivering a “knockout blow”. Fans think Abbott spoke for the common man when he asked of Kevin Rudd: “does this guy ever shut up?”

The phrase “common man” is neither a typo nor sexist slip. Abbott has reawakened the gender war, this time dragging the media into the frame. The question is: will anybody notice? When it comes to television, the answer is probably not. Because blokes like Abbott have ever been its stock in trade.

Some of this isn't about Abbott. Or this election. Or even Australia. It's about the medium that is still central to media politics.

Television still exerts a mythical power over elections. Looking at last night, it's hard not to think of the Kennedy-Nixon US presidential debates in 1960. Then, so the story goes, television's capacity to unravel politicians with its inquisitorial live-to-air stare changed history. Whether that is true or not is immaterial: it is widely believed.

So it's likely that Abbott's put-down will pass into the history of Australian media politics. As we are in the process of making myths, let's get back to gender. Abbott's crack speaks to a less visible television trend that doesn't bode well for Australia.

Much has been made in this campaign about how our parties have looked to America for their strategies. Barack Obama's social media capabilities are the talk of the town, but the US president understands the power of televised taunting only too well. Ask one-time White House hopeful Donald Trump.

"The Donald", darling of the "birther" movement, was left literally speechless during a televised roast, where Obama offered this bon mot in reference to Trump's television show, *Celebrity Apprentice*: "You, Mr Trump, recognised that the real problem was a lack of leadership. And so ultimately, you didn't blame Lil' Jon or Meatloaf. You fired Gary Busey. And these are the kind of decisions that would keep me up at night."

But the advent of the stand-up comedian politician speaks to less savoury developments. What we saw last night is the comedy of conflict. And even some of its most skilled performers are uneasy.

Daily Show host and American comedian Jon Stewart has previously asked right-wing political commentators in the United States to "stop hurting America". This wasn't an ad hominem attack; more a plea to abandon a particular style of political commentary whose goal it is to demonise and demean opposing views.

Stewart's fears took a grave turn in 2011. When US Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot in an attempted assassination, prominent media commentators wondered if they were somehow to blame. Political commentator Keith Olbermann publicly accused male media presenters of debasing politics to a slanging match between blokes. It wasn't surprising, to him, that a woman had been hurt in the fallout.

One could argue that the incident summarised a history of US television. In a series of “violence profiles” conducted during the 1970s, academics found screen conflict was mostly about gender and power. Back then, TV told the same story over and over again: the world was a dangerous place, and women were most likely to be its victims. The only people who were likely to survive the screen were “white, middle-aged men in the prime of life”.

At face value, these look like dated arguments: media are full of all kinds of women, doing whatever they like. In television and film, at least, there are no limits.

But former prime minister Julia Gillard’s experiences suggest that the medium’s old reflexes are still there, like some sort of patriarchal Arthurian legend, ready to go to work when the situation demands. The fable goes like this: women, stay where you are, keep society as it is, we will protect you. And you will be punished if you try to be different.

Whatever your political persuasion, it’s hard not to see that in Gillard’s political demise, Australia’s first female prime minister was subjected to unprecedented personal ridicule, and her deceased father was insulted. When she complained of gender bias, this was dismissed as nothing but the forlorn hope of an opportunist who had run out of luck. The idea that she might have a point was laughed at.

Today, Gillard must be tempted to say “told you so”. But she won’t, because in the end she was silenced: symbolically annihilated. This wasn’t just down to the gender politics of the media. But last night we saw how smoothly these politics slot into what we think of as entertainment. If Abbott’s quip seems run-of-the-mill, that’s precisely the problem. A pugilistic male politician telling his opponent to shut up is what passes for wit.

Today, Julia Gillard is owed an apology.

Why Abbott is right to abandon surplus promise

Geoffrey Garrett

University of New South Wales

27 August 2013

After beating up Kevin Rudd and Labor over debt and deficits for years, Tony Abbott has now dumped any return to surplus mantra, merely saying a Coalition government would beat Labor's bottom line over the next few years.

This about-face is smart politics and good policy. Rudd's "cut to the bone" critique makes it hard to attack the Coalition for not balancing the budget.

Behind closed doors, Abbott and Rudd probably agree that with Australian unemployment rising and Xi Jinping and Ben Bernanke both taking their feet off the accelerator at the same time, now is not the time to bring a David Cameron-style austerity regime downunder.

Austerity didn't work for Britain when China and the United States were pumping up their economies. With both now in fiscal and monetary retreat, the notion of austerity-led recovery in Australia next year is fanciful.

Instead, Abbott is betting his company, carbon and mining tax cuts will revive the economy and generate more revenue, 1980s Reaganomics-style. Unlike most western countries, Australia can afford to follow the Reagan playbook.

Debt, lies and statistics

When it comes to debt and deficit, Australia isn't Greece. It isn't even Canada, Germany or Switzerland, three apparent western paragons of post-GFC virtue.

Understanding Australia's public debt position requires more nuance than the sound bite-driven political point scoring

that all too often masquerades as serious policy analysis. But the importance of getting the debt picture right justifies a deep dive into the statistics.

Kevin Rudd says our public debt is very low, showing just how well he navigated the GFC.

Joe Hockey says our debt is growing more quickly than almost anywhere, revealing Labor's profligacy and mismanagement.

The problem is there is evidence to support both positions. As the old saying goes, there are lies, damn lies and then there are statistics.

But once you go through all the statistics, one thing seems clear: now is not the time to focus on bringing the budget back to surplus.

Meaningful international comparisons

The International Monetary Fund's Fiscal Monitor is the government debt bible. Its statistic of choice is gross general public debt, the total amount of money all levels of government have borrowed and have eventually to pay back, expressed as a percentage of GDP so as to make comparisons among countries meaningful.

Australian gross public debt will be 27.6% of GDP by the end of this year. This is the second lowest among the 30 advanced economies monitored by the IMF, above only tiny Estonia. Fully two-thirds of the advanced countries the IMF monitors have gross public debt more than twice as large as Australia's.

Germany is the best performer among the large G8 economies. Its 2013 gross public debt is slated at 80.4% of GDP, almost three times Australia's. The comparable figures for the United Kingdom and the United States are 93.6% and 108.1%. Japan's gross public debt will be a stratospheric 245.4%.

So Rudd is right that Australia today is a very low public debt country.

But the Coalition says it was the Howard government that put Australia in this enviable position, a position that Labor has subsequently let deteriorate. They are spot on.

Australian gross public debt was 10% of GDP in 2006, the last full year of the Howard government. Again, Australia was only beaten by ever-abstemious Estonia.

“Debt blow-out”

The key question concerns how Australia has fared since 2006, and what this means for the future. When Hockey lambasts Labor for its debt blow-out, he is referring to proportionate growth in Australian gross public debt.

The IMF estimates Australian debt has grown by 176% since 2006. Put differently, Australian debt has almost trebled in the past seven years. And on this measure only two countries, Iceland and Ireland, have performed worse — and both were devastated by the GFC.

The US’s post-GFC stimulus is legendary, but its gross public debt has “only” grown by 64% since 2006 and this year is three times better than Australia’s performance. But this “better” is a product of the fact that the United States started with much more public debt.

Things look very different if we simply look at the increase in debt as a percentage of GDP. On this measure, Australia’s debt situation has weakened from 10% in 2006 to 27.6% this year. Put differently, our debt has grown by 17.6% of GDP.

Here, Australia lies right in the middle of the IMF league table. We have done much better than the United States, where public debt has increased by 42.0% of GDP, and the United Kingdom, where it has increased by 50.6%. But we have done worse than Germany (+12.5% of GDP) and Canada (+16.7%).

Did Australia need an “average” level of fiscal stimulus after the GFC? Has this stimulus been productive or wasted? The Coalition is probably right that Labor did too much and some

wasn't very effective. Labor is probably right: it was better to do too much than too little in the eye of the GFC storm.

Voters' choice

But it doesn't seem voters are interested in our politicians re-fighting this old war. They are probably more interested in the future.

The IMF estimates that by 2018, based on Labor's plans, Australian public debt will be back under 20% of GDP — still second behind Estonia, and compared with around 100% in both the United States and United Kingdom. If we are to believe Tony Abbott, the Australian number will be smaller under a Coalition government.

Australia is not in a fiscal crisis and its economy is slowing. Few would have thought that Tony Abbott would respond by going soft on deficits. But he is right to do so, and it seems voters will agree on September 7.

Wanted: political leader with a vision for a sustainable future

Helen Camakaris

University of Melbourne

28 August 2013

A sustainable future remains within our grasp but — thanks to the way human brains work — only governments can implement many of the necessary strategies. Our political leaders have a unique responsibility.

Consensus politics and compromise may well be the only way that we can deal with existential threats such as climate change, food and water scarcity, and the social disruption that would inevitably follow. If the current election campaign is anything to go by, these concepts do not come easily to Australia's political leaders. But perhaps that will change.

Humanity's approach to these problems is limited by the way our brains have evolved. Climate change presents a challenge to our evolved altruism, which is circumscribed by expectations of benefit to kin or reciprocal reward and an obsession with fairness.

Similarly, our drives to seek status and consume goods are largely instinctive; our evolved intelligence has simply taken them to a higher level. Unfortunately, contemplating the long-term future is not on our radar. That is why good government is so important.

So can our current political leaders guide us toward a safer world?

We need leaders who are prepared to put forward long-term plans for decades, even centuries, something which does not come naturally since we evolved to live in the present, and our instincts encourage us to discount the future and underestimate risk. They must resist the temptation to appeal only to immediate self-interest, a shortcoming of our current adversarial democracy and short election cycles where leaders appeal constantly to the hip-pocket nerve.

Consensus on intractable problems could be achieved by a commitment to multi-party committees. Bipartisan thinktanks that include members of parliament and independent experts can help circumvent parochial attitudes, and foster rational decision-making for the long-term future. Indeed, a party that commits to such a model for helping to formulate policy for intractable problems might well win support in the electorate.

Governments must extend the use of incentives and disincentives to satisfy our desire for fairness. Where policy to promote long-term sustainability conflicts with immediate self-interest, clever strategies can guide behaviour while still providing choice. In Australia, the carbon tax was coupled with compensation for most citizens and some industries, making the personal cost minimal.

Unfortunately, the Liberal Party's Direct Action Plan fails to offer any incentive to individuals to decrease fossil fuel energy use. It would also fail to deliver the minimum 5% cut by 2020 without an injection of a further A\$4 billion. It would be necessary to either increase taxes or decrease services and, since paying for a secure future does not come naturally, there is a significant risk that Australia would abandon its pledge.

The Direct Action Plan also demonstrates our genetic predisposition to live in the present. There would be no mechanism for Australia to achieve the necessary further cuts beyond 2020. In contrast, Labor's emissions trading scheme links our efforts to global action, and the introduction of a cap would ensure that we meet future obligations.

The government must also recognise our responsibility toward citizens of future generations, and those beyond our borders who will be affected by our actions. Such attitudes are not instinctive because of the origins of altruism, but they are morally equitable. The disadvantaged in developing nations have a right to move toward a reasonable standard of living. Sanitation, health care, and adequate food and water are basic human rights, and the simple comforts of life could all be provided by green electricity with support from the developed world.

Stewardship of Earth must be seen as a government responsibility. Currently, both parties promote growth, but continuing growth is impossible on a finite planet, a fact that is not intuitively apparent to many people. Might we be able to move toward the goal of sustainability if the government incorporated gradual changes that move us in the right direction?

The developed world must ultimately move toward a steady state economy. Many countries already have a per capita GDP growth close to zero — such a situation could be normalised and still provide a good quality of life. There are a number of strategies that would move us in this direction.

Gradually introduced cradle-to-grave pricing incorporating social and environmental costs would decrease consumption and moderate growth, and might be a more acceptable way to increase government revenue than an across-the-board increase in GST.

Reduced working hours as an optional alternative to increased salaries would also moderate consumption, ease unemployment, reduce inequity and increase leisure time, and would undoubtedly be popular with sections of the electorate. Research has shown that happiness does not increase above a modest income, but is a product of the quality of our relationships, our engagement with community, and time for pursuing our interests.

Runaway growth is also fed by the salary “arms race”, particularly in the corporate sector. The instinctive drive to demonstrate status is then made visible by the purchase of inordinately expensive homes and prestige cars, driving conspicuous consumption. Instead, status could be recognised by relative salaries maintained within limits by regulation or taxation, complemented by honours and significant privileges.

The rush to exploit our natural resources should also be slowed down to provide for the future, again something we instinctively tend to ignore. A significant tax on mining profits that creates a healthy future fund would leave more resources in the ground, provide income for new industries for the future, and decrease the extraordinary incomes and extravagant lifestyles that flow to the lucky few through happenstance.

We must frame this debate in the context of leaving a habitable world for future generations, and highlighting humanity’s common heritage. The world desperately needs countries that will lead: there is no reason why ours should not be one of them.

The 2013 election and the death of rationality

Barry Jones

University of Melbourne

29 August 2013

As somebody with a lifelong, but not very happy, involvement in politics, I must declare an interest, as a life member of the ALP. Nevertheless, I think I can be objective in describing the decay of our political system. I was one of many who thought that the 2010 election would be the worst in our modern history for the debased quality of political discourse, but all indications are that the 2013 election is on track to be even worse.

Lindsay Tanner contends that 1993, when he was elected to the House of Representatives, was the high point of rationality in Australian politics but by 2010, when he left, it had sunk to an abyss of populism, despite our rising participation rates in education.

Party spin-doctors, on both sides of politics, work on the assumption that by this stage in the election cycle about 80% of voters have already decided how they will vote, and that short of some major event (Cabinet ministers charged with felony, perhaps) nothing that is said or done in the campaign will change that. The 20% who are uncommitted, profiling suggests, are neither interested nor involved in the issues, do not much care about the outcome, are largely voting because they are obliged to do it, and will make up their minds on the day — perhaps as they stand in line waiting to receive their ballots.

Reaching these voters is not by raising serious issues, setting out a vision or challenge, by emphasising fear (“you don’t realise how bad things are ... you are at risk ...”) or by entertaining them, appealing to quick jokey references, as with Twitter, or offering bribes, the appeal to greed. Some elements in the media play

up to this approach with trivialising gimmicks — for example, interviewing a cat for his/her political opinions on Channel Nine.

Geoff Kitney wrote an important article for the *Australian Financial Review* — Vote for Abbott, and vote against politics — describing Abbott as the anti-politics politician, who puts a heavy emphasis on appealing to those (many?) reluctant voters who say: “I can’t stand politics, and don’t even pretend to understand it”. This does not just discourage debate on complex issues, it kills it. There may be even a bonus for non-involvement, to be told: “Don’t feel badly about knowing so little — celebrate it”.

Despite Australia’s high formal levels of literacy, politicians are increasingly dedicated to delivering three word slogans (“Stop the boats!”) — now degenerating even more to the use of one word, repeated three times (“Cut! Cut! Cut!” or “Lie! Lie! Lie!”).

There is an exaggerated emphasis on “gotcha!” moments — Tony Abbott and his suppository, Kevin Rudd and the make-up lady, moronic candidates in swinging seats. In the last months of Julia Gillard’s period as prime minister, in two separate incidents, sandwiches (vegemite and salami as it happens) were thrown at her at schools, for reasons which have never been clarified. The incidents became big news stories, so much so that they crowded out major announcements about the Gonski reforms that she was planning to make.

Often politicians acquiesce in the trivialising; for example, Kevin Rudd and his availability for selfies, Tony Abbott gyrating at a boot-camp, and his “dad moments”. We should have a minute’s silence to reflect on the contribution of Julie Bishop, Warren Truss and Clive Palmer to the campaign.

The Murdoch factor will have an increasingly strong influence on political outcomes in Australia. About 65% of Australian newspaper readers already make a democratic choice to buy News Corp journals, and the figure approaches 100% in Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart where readers have the choice of

Murdoch or Murdoch, unless they can find the *Financial Review*. It is a dangerous area to speculate about.

The Murdoch papers are no longer reporting the news, but shaping it. They no longer claim objectivity but have become players, powerful advocates on policy issues: hostile to the science of climate change, harsh on refugees, indifferent to the environment, protective of the mining industry, trashing the record of the 43rd parliament, and promoting a dichotomy of uncritical praise and contemptuous loathing. Does it affect outcomes? I am sure that it does, and obviously advertisers think so.

There should be appropriate recognition of the major achievement of the 43rd Australian House of Representatives, the much traduced “hung parliament”, which lasted its full term, and passed 580 bills, 87% of them with opposition support, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the Gonski reforms. Julia Gillard deserves credit for maintaining support from independents and never facing a censure motion.

I have been involved in politics for a long time — far too long — but I have never observed such levels of loathing and personal hatred for political figures. Julia Gillard, Kevin Rudd, and Tony Windsor have been subject to unprecedentedly vindictive attacks, as has Tony Abbott to a degree and John Howard in his time. It is one of the ugliest factors in our public life.

Despite the exponential increases in public education and access to information in the past century, the quality of political debate appears to have become increasingly unsophisticated, appealing to the lowest common denominator of understanding. Does anyone’s vote change after seeing a prime minister or opposition leader in a supermarket or factory? I am open to persuasion but I doubt it.

The environment has essentially fallen off the political agenda. It was a big issue in 1983 (on the Tasmanian dams controversy) and in 2007 when Kevin Rudd referred to climate change as the “greatest moral, economic and social challenge of

our time”. Morgan polls indicated that in 2008, 35% of Australians nominated the environment as a major issue; by 2013 this has fallen to 7%.

Climate change is referred to during the election in a few passing sentences, essentially as if the carbon pricing or emissions trading scheme (ETS) measures were all about promoting clean air/clean energy, with no references to the role of “greenhouse gases” in trapping and retaining heat, and their impact on climate change and extreme weather events. There is no attempt to grapple with the issue and to explain the long-term implications of a two- or three-degree increase in global temperatures. One side is feeble, the other mendacious. There is barely any reference to planning for a post-carbon economy, other than vague references to “new jobs”.

There will be no serious debate about taxation in this campaign. Australia must have more revenue, to maintain appropriate levels of education, health, infrastructure and social security for a growing, ageing population, especially measures that will keep older Australians fit, active, independent and out of institutions. The recommendations of the 2010 Henry Review should be revisited and applied, rejecting the populist argument that only cutting taxation (and expenditure) will improve quality of life. Taxation is the price we pay for civilisation.

The political debate about the state of the Australian economy is an affront to rationality.

Australia has had 21 unbroken years of economic growth, has been praised by the IMF and Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz as having had the best policy response to the global financial crisis, with lower unemployment than most OECD countries, low interest rates, a AAA credit rating from all three major agencies (enjoyed by very few national economies), a low level of international debt, high levels of foreign investment, a ranking next to Norway on the Human Development Index (HDI), and one of the lowest taxation rates in the OECD, ahead of the United States,

but well behind the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Canada, New Zealand, and a little behind Japan. Is this good news or bad news? It looks like good news to me.

Of course, I recognise that there has been a continuity of economic policy going back through Gillard, Rudd (the first time), Howard, Keating and Hawke.

Despite Australia's very high ranking internationally, the level of political discourse on economics is so debased that polling indicates very high levels of anxiety about the economy. Citizens can hardly believe the international comparisons — the reasons being that they are only exposed, day by day, to one economy, and objective evidence from far away is not compelling psychologically.

I have watched, with some pain, election telecasts being given by the shadow treasurer, Joe Hockey, somebody who I have always had some regard for — balanced, recognisably human, and not a fanatic, with touches of self-mockery.

He could have taken a more subtle, nuanced approach in his pitch, saying, perhaps, “while it is true that Australia has had some outstanding successes, such as the AAA rating and 21 unbroken years of growth, nevertheless there are some worrying indications that ...”, and go on from there.

Instead, he plays the catastrophist card, that the past six years had left the Australian economy as a smoking ruin, and the rest of the world is looking to see when Australia will turn the lights back on. Catastrophic? Disaster? Tsunami? The clear suggestion is that practically every nation, with the possible exception of Somalia, is performing better economically than Australia.

Does Joe Hockey really believe what he is saying? I hope not. He certainly would not want to be questioned or sign an affidavit about it. But I suspect he might say: “The rules of the game have changed. In politics, one can say anything — whatever it takes to win.” My side of politics is not spotless in this area either: Graham Richardson's book *Whatever It Takes* set the standard.

The power of the fragment: Why politicians have turned their backs on climate

Clive Hamilton
Charles Sturt University
2 September 2013

A recent Vote Compass poll shows 61% of Australian adults want the federal government to do more to tackle climate change; 18% want it to do less. This figure, consistent with many polls over the years, squares with various developments in Australian politics but contradicts others.

The Howard government lost the 2007 election in part because it was not seen to be doing enough to tackle climate change. When he was prime minister the first time, Kevin Rudd's popularity fell sharply when he appeared to abandon plans to reduce Australia's emissions. And Malcolm Turnbull is the preferred Liberal leader in substantial measure because he is more hawkish on the issue.

Against these examples, the Gillard government's support fell after it introduced the carbon price. And now both major parties are watering down their commitments to reduce emissions.

The truth is the Australian public does not know what it wants its government to do on climate change. A large majority wants it to do something, but the government seems to lose support whenever it does anything. The only notable exception (and perhaps because many people don't know it exists) is the Renewable Energy Target, first introduced by the Howard government as a sop to public anxiety.

For any political leader unwilling to exercise leadership on the issue, trying to respond to climate change leaves them uncertain which way to turn.

The confusion and fretfulness over how to respond to global warming is an expression of the uniqueness of climate change among environmental issues. It ought to be simple: the science tells us that to have a reasonable chance of limiting warming to the widely accepted target of 2°C, rich countries such as Australia (and especially Australia) must reduce their emissions by 25–40% by 2020. They must continue to reduce them until they are at least 90% lower by the middle of the century.

All of the economic modelling shows the required transition in the energy economy would come at modest, even trivial, overall cost. Yes, there would be substantial adjustment, including job losses in old energy industries as they are replaced by new ones. But dealing with structural change has not prevented governments in the past from undertaking major reforms, such as tariff cuts, competition policy and forest protection. By any measure, these have been much less important to the nation's future.

Part of the difficulty lies in the way politics has transformed over the last 30 years. The 1980s convergence on neo-liberalism, accelerated by the collapse of communism, has not seen the populace coalesce around a common conception of the national interest. Instead, it has fragmented.

In place of a grand ideological contest over who should rule, the centre has relinquished its authority. Politics today is increasingly dominated by rancorous and self-righteous groups that constellate around specific issues.

The fragmentation of politics, which goes beyond traditional pressure group activities, is in part due to a better educated population more willing to challenge traditional forms of authority. In itself this is a good thing. The exception is when the authority being challenged really does know best, as is true of immunology and atmospheric physics. In this case, a little knowledge can indeed be a dangerous thing. The internet gives as much access to disinformation as it does to information, and some are not educated in how to judge the difference.

Climate politics has been caught in this new dispensation. There is an irony to this because it is one of the few cases where the objective case for a strong action is overwhelming. Yet we have seen politicians anxiously trying to catch the public mood, seemingly unaware that the mood is determined by a raucous and angry minority of so-called sceptics.

Tony Abbott beat Malcolm Turnbull for the Liberal Party leadership by one vote after backbenchers were spooked by an organised torrent of emails, phone calls, faxes and letters that flooded into their offices. Julia Gillard's support never recovered from the "JuLiar" campaign promulgated by a small but determined and well-organised campaign that echoed not only in the blogosphere but in the mainstream media too.

The new kind of interest group politics can be highly effective when the majority is willing to tolerate it. In what might be called "the equation of influence", if we take a small number of activists and multiply it by their level of passion the product will be bigger than the one we obtain by taking a very large number and multiplying it by a care factor that ranges from periodic hand-wringing to "couldn't be arsed".

While most Australians are concerned about climate change they are not concerned enough to take on strident deniers in everyday situations. Al Gore recently put it this way:

The conversation on global warming has been stalled because a shrinking group of denialists fly into a rage when it's mentioned. It's like a family with an alcoholic father who flies into a rage every time a subject is mentioned and so everybody avoids the elephant in the room to keep the peace.

We see most starkly the power a rampant faction can wield in the Republican Party in the United States, where those who led it a decade ago are saying: "What happened? How did we allow the Tea Party to capture our party?" They were not willing to resist those fired-up people and now they have to figure out how to take their party back. Because the Tea Party is like a poison that, until

it is sucked out, will prevent the Republicans ever regaining their former influence.

Although not as decisive, the Coalition parties in Australia have experienced a similar invasion. We've seen, for example, party conferences pass resolutions against the teaching of climate science in schools.

The question arises of whether an Abbott government, by pacifying the anti-science activists, will provoke the broad and diverse body of the "climate concerned" into a phase of much more intense activism?

The reasons for exasperation will come thick and fast from the new government: the appointment of charlatans to senior advisory positions; evisceration of the federal climate change department; winding back legislation, including the Renewable Energy Target; rising emissions as the Direct Action Plan fails; and Australia taking a spoiling role at international meetings, especially the crucial Conference of the Parties in Paris in 2015.

Taking the long view, perhaps a reactionary government is what climate activism needs to reverse the equation of influence, to force the polity to leapfrog the half-measures we have seen so far. After all, it is what the science demands.

Hidden in plain sight: Commission cuts and non-core promises

John Quiggin
University of Queensland
 5 September 2013

There has been much, and justified, criticism of Tony Abbott's decision to conceal the costings of his policies until two days before the election, when the electronic media blackout will be in place.

There is an obvious risk that politically unappealing cuts are being saved until the last minute. But the most frightening possibility for an Abbott government is already in plain view: the promise to appoint a Commission of Audit. This has become standard operating procedure for an incoming Liberal-National Party government, and the outcome is entirely predictable.

Over at least a dozen such Commissions, the script has never varied. The Commission will announce a discovery that the public finances are far worse than the outgoing Labor government admitted, and will advise the government to ditch many of its election promises.

Promises, promises

The abandoned promises won't include handouts to business or favoured political groups — the necessary cuts will focus on health, education and payments to the poor and disadvantaged.

Of course, Abbott has promised not to cut these areas. But the political tradition of the LNP is that a Commission of Audit report trumps all such promises.

In the lead-up to the 1996 election, John Howard was asked directly whether he would stick to his promises regardless of the Budget's state. But, with the aid of the Commission of Audit set up by Peter Costello, Howard invented the category of "core" promises, which would be kept. The public was left to infer that everything else was "non-core".

More recently, campaigning in Queensland, Campbell Newman promised public servants they had nothing to fear from an LNP government. When he took office, he turned to Costello to perform the inevitable Commission of Audit, which varied only marginally from the 1996 version Costello himself had commissioned.

Newman invented his own variation on the core/non-core distinction, claiming that he had meant his promise to apply only to "frontline" workers. When the sackings extended to

nurses and teachers, he clarified further, saying that he meant “frontline services”, not the workers who were supposed to deliver them.

It’s possible that the politics will prove too difficult for Abbott, as happened to Ted Baillieu. By the time his Commission of Audit report was ready, with its recommendations of radical privatisations, Baillieu was already on the way out and the report was too politically toxic to be released.

But that’s only likely in the event of a razor-thin majority, the outcome most voters would like least.

A question of scale

What effect would arise from the scale of cuts that the Commission of Audit typically proposes? The cuts introduced after the 1996 election were on the scale of 1–2% of GDP, equivalent to A\$15–30 billion today.

In the context of a weakening economy, as may well be the case, public sector cuts have a “multiplier” effect, reducing activity by more than the amount of the original cut. The International Monetary Fund has recently estimated the multiplier at around 1.5, so that a 1–2% cut in public spending would generate a cut of 1.5–3% in economic activity, enough to turn a slowdown into a recession.

In terms of employment, the standard estimate, called Okun’s Law by economists, is that each percentage point reduction in GDP increases the unemployment rate by 0.5%, and reduces employment by about the same amount. In the worst case of a 3% decline, it might imply a 1.5 percentage point increase in the unemployment rate.

This is consistent with the experience in Queensland, where employment has declined, relative to trend, by more than the amount of Newman’s cuts.

Under normal circumstances, monetary policy could be relaxed to offset the effects of such fiscal austerity. But with the cash rate down to 2.5%, the Reserve Bank does not have much

room to move. The RBA would be very reluctant to cut rates to zero, at which point the only option would be the kind of quantitative easing that the US Federal Reserve implemented with only limited success.

Of course, it is possible that the Commission of Audit's inevitable recommendations for massive cuts will be ignored and that an Abbott government will make no cuts beyond those to be announced on election eve.

As Winnie the Pooh's gloomy companion Eeyore said in a similar situation: "That's what would be so interesting. Not being quite sure till afterwards."