

Howard feels the heat as Rudd-mania grows: the polls look bad for the Government but the economy still gives it an important edge, says PETER BRENT

Canberra Times

22 March 2007

p19

Talk about rotten luck. Last weekend, Newspoll phoned 1158 Australians and asked them how they would vote at a federal election. The result, published on Tuesday, was 61 to 39 two-party preferred in Labor's favour, a record lead for any party in the pollster's history.

The bad luck for Prime Minister John Howard was the pollster's decision to throw in some extra questions about the leaders' personalities. They don't do this often, and the response from this angry group of 1158 was all bad for Howard and good for Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd. It generated more front-page stories yesterday.

The continuing flow of awful numbers must dishearten the Government, but Rudd-mania will come to an end some time. We're barely out of summer, and he's hardly opened his mouth. People will tire of him eventually. However, even if this happens before the next election, and Rudd ends up being, say, only as popular as his predecessor Kim Beazley, it's difficult to see him losing.

This week's Newspoll also showed the second-largest primary-vote lead for either side in the pollster's history. The leader who recorded the largest lead was Liberal John Hewson in 1993. Rudd's "better prime minister" rating was Newspoll's highest ever, but runner-up was Alexander Downer in 1995.

The obvious point of these numbers is that polls are fickle. But there is a more important one, that Hewson and Downer attracted those numbers in the final term of the Labor government's 13-year reign. You could call it electoral gravity, and it is likely that current polling reflects that, after 11 years, this Government is in big, big trouble.

Barely a newspaper day goes by without a lovingly crafted dissertation explaining the new Labor leader's unique brand of politics. How he's broken the Labor mould, reinvented politics and perhaps discovered the key to the Lodge. Why, he even attacks Howard from the right!

But in truth, Rudd is a politician from central casting and his bag of tricks is as old as the profession itself. He's doing what successful oppositions generally do: he's plonked himself in the middle ground, but within that is differentiating himself from the incumbent.

Rudd tries to strike the balance between offering something new and not scaring the horses. Like all politicians he has a dollar each way when he can get away with it and at the moment, that's pretty often. And, yes, he flirts with the PM's natural constituency.

If the Government survives this year, it will be because of the economy. It's the only suit it holds, and it is a very strong one. It has been the economy, and not conviction politics, culture wars, battlers, or even national security, that has kept this government in office. Fifteen years of economic growth here and globally don't come along every generation.

Labor's challenge is not to make itself the perceived superior economic manager; it can't do that from Opposition. Instead it has to minimise the electorate's misgivings about its economic credentials and get it to think about other things. Shadow treasurer Wayne Swan, competent, rehearsed, unthreatening and blessedly magnetism-free is just the man for the job.

Labor's economic Achilles heel is perhaps paradoxically industrial relations. Some have compared WorkChoices with the GST, and Labor's "almost win" in 1998. But the GST affected everyone, while WorkChoices impacts only a minority, most of whom are Labor voters anyway.

This analysis also looks at the wrong "GST election". Fear of the unknown is a powerful electoral tool, but inviting voters to punish a government for something they've introduced is something different. The comparable poll is instead 2001, after the new tax was introduced. This was the "Rollback" (and of course "Tampa") election.

As timid as Rollback was, it became a negative for Labor because it meant more change, promising headaches for small business people. It became an issue. So while WorkChoices is unpopular, reacting to it similarly holds dangers. The Government of course didn't tell anyone about the industrial-relations changes before the last election, but no one said politics was fair.

If Labor now promises change, its promises will become an issue. And with the unions spending up on advertisements and the ACTU upping its profile, the Government can ask what they might expect in return from a Labor government? This is a powerful line that Rudd and company are obviously aware of.

There is, however, another upside for Labor in IR. It is the promise of more deregulation if the Government wins again.

Perhaps you could summarise the swinging voter's mindset, as she wanders into the polling station at the local school later this year, like this: "I've had enough of Howard and his bunch, they've been in power too long, but they do know how to run an economy. I quite like the new guy and what he says, it is time for something new, but can he and his party be trusted?" The Government nailed Latham on this question three years ago, but Rudd will be much more slippery proposition.

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