

Abbott's back-foot stumbles

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ABSTRACT

The Opposition Leader's week started badly then just got worse JULIA Gillard emerged from flood, cyclone, tax hikes, health retreats and rotten polls to enjoy a dream opening week to the 2011 parliamentary year as the Tony Abbott-led Coalition faltered on nearly every front. The week's most powerful image was Gillard at Tuesday's condolence motion standing at the dispatch box holding up an Australian flag given to her by the crew of a defence force helicopter, a symbol she said, of the Australian spirit in adversity.

FULL TEXT

The Opposition Leader's week started badly then just got worse

JULIA Gillard emerged from flood, cyclone, tax hikes, health retreats and rotten polls to enjoy a dream opening week to the 2011 parliamentary year as the Tony Abbott-led Coalition faltered on nearly every front.

For the Coalition, it is hard to imagine a more unconvincing week. Abbott's immediate task is to show it is the exception not the new norm. Showered with evidence of Labor's vulnerability and confusion, Abbott stumbled into personality, tactical and media mishaps. He was guilty of serial blunders. He made the Coalition the issue, triggered a rift with deputy leader Julie Bishop and had a bizarre meltdown before the television cameras when the Seven Network staged a cynical ambush chasing its gotcha moment.

The Coalition's real problems, however, are hubris and amateurism in the ranks. With polls showing Labor's primary vote at a disastrous 32 per cent the Coalition should be united, cohesive and dominant. It wasn't this week. Just the opposite. It was leaking from shadow cabinet, poorly organised and outmanoeuvred.

The week's most powerful image was Gillard at Tuesday's condolence motion standing at the dispatch box holding up an Australian flag given to her by the crew of a defence force helicopter, a symbol she said, of the Australian spirit in adversity.

Here was Gillard, leader during a national crisis, invoking mateship and elevating the flag as the symbol of unity and resilience. Gillard's entire credibility, however, pivots upon being able to legislate her temporary one-year flood levy through the parliament. Success here is essential; failure would ruin her position.

For Abbott, there are multiple problems at work but one universal difficulty -- he is too aggressive, too impatient, too transparent in his declared effort to destroy Gillard's government as soon as possible. This is the opposite of John Curtin's tactics during the early 1940s -- the last time an opposition leader became prime minister due to a voting switch by independents. Abbott's excessive bravado was seen in comments to his shadow ministry last Monday around the theme of Gillard Labor staggering to an early doom.

"We will be doing everything we humanly can to try to get rid of a bad government," Abbott told his colleagues.

"I think that every month that this government lasts is in a sense a worse month for our country than it should be. It's our job to do everything we can to bring about change for the better as soon as possible."

Such declamatory aggression is highly dubious strategy. It means every month Labor lasts can be depicted as Abbott's failure to achieve his goal. By setting this test Abbott creates loads of risks for himself. There is no sign the independents plan to ruin Labor any time soon. There is no sign Abbott can bludgeon Labor out of office. There is no sign that announcing to the entire world at the start of 2011 that the Coalition's task is a change of government "as soon as possible" is the best means of keeping the pressure on Labor.

Abbott's decision to oppose the levy was a no-brainer. Rejecting the levy is not an issue of dispute among senior

Coalition figures. Abbott is right to say Labor could have found more savings. Indeed, there is no practice of levies being used to fund disaster recoveries and Abbott's central strategy is to oppose new taxes anyway. Abbott's problem, however, was that the Coalition via media interviews stumbled into the commitment to identify its own spending cuts to substitute for the levy. This decision emerged on the run. It was formalised in a leadership group phone hook-up. For Abbott, this was a decisive moment -- at this stage he concluded that with the Coalition pushing for a change of government it could not reject the levy without tabling its own alternative spending cuts. It was a tough decision but high-risk. Deputy leader Bishop was convinced this was the wrong approach.

"There was no strategy," she told colleagues. A fortnight ago during a phone conversation Bishop told Abbott it would be a mistake to identify spending cuts. She said the cuts would be theoretical, the Coalition was not in office and such a list would make the Coalition the issue instead of Labor. But Abbott rejected this advice. "Julie, to be credible I think I must identify the cuts," he said.

Why did Abbott, a mere six months after the August election, trap himself into releasing new spending cuts? Has this ever happened in any previous parliament in Australia's history? Can you imagine John Howard doing this? The answer to these questions lies in Abbott's impatience and willingness to take risks to become PM earlier rather than later.

As he told the shadow ministry, it was vital to demonstrate the Coalition as "a credible alternative and that's what we'll be working on this year". Sounds swell. But making spending cuts on the run can backfire.

The work on the cuts was done by Abbott's office, opposition treasury spokesman Joe Hockey and finance spokesman Andrew Robb and their offices. The shadow cabinet met last Friday week to consider the position and the evening before a list of proposed cuts was distributed.

Bishop was overseas but when she saw this list she was shocked: it proposed a \$370 million cut to aid to Africa. Unhappy about both the principle of the cuts and the details, she asked Philip Ruddock to convey her views at the meeting.

On Monday this week when the shadow cabinet met, Abbott, aware of Bishop's concerns, invited her to outline her position. Bishop argued making cuts was a mistake that would linger to the next election, that the Coalition with its \$50 billion hit list in the previous campaign proved it was willing to take hard decisions and that naming programs to slash would become a permanent political burden.

She complained there had been no proper expenditure review process. The aid cut would be seen "as a breach of faith". The Coalition had wanted an aid review and Labor had established it late last year with a former Liberal senator Margaret Reid on the panel. Bishop said this reinforced the need to find the cuts elsewhere.

It was apparent, however, the spending cuts strategy was now a given. There was a discussion about other spending options. Frontbencher Scott Morrison raised the issue of aid for religious schools in Indonesia, though Morrison is a strong backer of foreign aid and championed aid to Africa in his maiden speech.

After the meeting Bishop spoke to colleagues to identify alternative cuts to foreign aid.

That night Abbott, Bishop and Robb met in the leader's office. Abbott was now in a hurry. He wanted the issue finalised for the next day. Abbott proposed instead of cutting aid to Africa that a major cut be made to aid to Islamic schools in Indonesia. Bishop was horrified. "Why open up this new political front?" she asked. In front of Robb, who wanted to roll Bishop post-election, the deputy and the leader engaged in a heated dispute. Bishop said it was bad policy and bad politics. It would alienate the strong aid constituency, it was attacking a program that had begun with the Howard government, it would expose Abbott to attack for undermining his pledge to take foreign aid to 0.5 per cent of gross national income by 2015.

But Abbott was unmoved. "I've decided it's coming out of the foreign aid budget and it's the Indonesian school program," he said. Bishop complained again about the process and the strategy. She said this reflected One Nation's Queensland agenda. "Why won't you give me the chance to find the cuts elsewhere?" she asked. But Abbott insisted. They agreed to make the "cut" a deferral for two years and that later became four years.

On Wednesday Bishop read The Australian's Foreign Editor, Greg Sheridan's attack on the decision, saying it

showed what a "hopeless" shadow minister she was. Bishop went to Abbott with a serious complaint: Liberals were alleging that Abbott or his office was responsible for briefing Sheridan and that this was about leadership. Abbott was adamant: he told Bishop the issue was about foreign aid, not leadership. He accepted the cuts were his responsibility and his decision. Abbott told colleagues that Sheridan was not in the habit of writing whatever line he was fed from politicians.

But Gillard and Rudd were now in full flight with plenty of material. On Thursday Rudd told parliament the Indonesian program penetrated to core national security interests. Under the Howard government there were 2075 schools built; Labor planned to add another 2000. Rudd said former foreign minister Alexander Downer had bagged Abbott's decision. Referring to reports in The Australian of Bishop's alarm, Rudd said the problem for Abbott was that Bishop "is right on this – absolutely right".

Labor made merry hell with the Abbott-Bishop rift. Have no doubt the Indonesian decision is substantial. It is a \$448m deferral across the forward estimates pending assessment of the program by the aid review.

The Coalition's bigger ticket spending cuts were \$500m from car industry support and \$600m as partial deferrals of Murray-Darling water buybacks in a total savings package worth \$2bn.

With the rumour mill spinning overtime Abbott sent out a clear message on Thursday -- he had the best possible senior team. He would not support any changes. He met Bishop and offered an unqualified assurance he wanted her as deputy. They agreed the dispute had been only about policy, not leadership.

This week's tensions played out against low-level static typified by media reports that Liberal MPs saw Abbott's performance on the Seven Network as "his Mark Latham moment".

The Coalition holds a winning position but does not project as a winning outfit. Labor's great hope is to re-ignite leadership instability within the Liberal Party. Are the Liberals fool enough to beat themselves? Meanwhile, Abbott should re-think how to maximise pressure on Labor. Perhaps he should read how John Curtin's blend of pressure and patience won him the highest office.

CHRISTOPHER PEARSON: P14

Credit: PAUL KELLY

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