

first election with a televised debate — when Peacock was the victor. Hawke won the election, but after that experience, in 1987 he declined to debate John Howard.

In 1993, Paul Keating did over John Hewson (44–22%) and Hewson lost his “unlosable” election.

In 1996, challenger Howard beat incumbent Keating at debating (36–23%) and won the election.

Howard was narrowly beaten by Kim Beazley in 1998 (28–30%), the year Howard scraped home at the GST election with a minority of the popular vote. In their next encounter, 2001, Beazley again won the debate (56–18%) but again lost the election; 2004 saw another Howard debating loss, this time to Mark Latham (25–42%), and another Howard election victory.

But it was a different story in 2007 when Howard lost both the debating (13–60%) and the election to Rudd.

In 2010, Gillard beat Abbott at debating (37–23%), while neither “won” the election, which produced the hung parliament. Nearly half the voters in the ANU study after the 2010 election said they had watched the Gillard–Abbott debate.

Does the debate have an effect? McAllister writes that “the number of voters who are swayed by a debate, net of other things, is very small. Those who are influenced in their vote by the debate tend to be non-partisans, or supporters of minor parties.”

In this regard, Essential Research today had some interesting findings from asking people when they expected they would make their final decision about whom they would vote for.

More than half said they had already decided (53%). These included 69% of Coalition voters and 55% of Labor supporters; 15% said they would finally make up their mind “during the election campaign”; 12% said in the last week before the election; 3% said the day before the election, and 8% said on election day.

This last figure makes some sense of the mad marathons we see from leaders at the death knock of campaigns (especially Abbott’s 36-hour continuous effort in 2010).

Those least likely to have made up their minds were people aged 18–24 (33%), Green voters (36%), and other party/independent voters (29%).

Another question also tackled this matter of “rusted-on” versus non-rusted-on voters. When people were asked how likely was it that they would change their vote before the election, 44% said they definitely would not change their mind (59% of Coalition voters, 40% of Labor voters) while another 30% said it was very unlikely they would do so.

Only 21% said it was “quite possible” they would change their mind “as the campaign develops” — a small proportion from one vantage point, but a potentially large pool for leaders seeking votes. Those most likely to say that it is possible they will change their mind were Green voters (35%), supporters of “other” parties and independents (49%), people aged 18–25 (32%) and women (25%).

These results suggest some voters have parked with the Greens as a protest, waiting to see if they want to jump one way or the other, or perhaps that Green supporters are evaluating that party during what could be a difficult election for it.

Most significant is that young voters are more likely than average to be persuadable. Rudd in particular will be pinning hopes on this demographic.

Remember his pitch to the young on the night he won the leadership back: “It’s clear that many of you, in fact far too many of you, have looked at our political system and the parliament in recent years and not liked or respected much of what you have seen.

“In fact, as I rock around the place, talking to my own kids, they see it as a huge national turn off.... I want to ask you to please come back and listen afresh. It’s really important that we get you engaged, in any way we can.

“We need you. We need your energy. We need your ideas. We need your enthusiasm and we need you to support us in the

great challenges that lie ahead for the country. With your energy, we can start cooking with gas.”

The Liberals have to be in this hunt too. One Liberal campaign source said tonight the feedback from local areas was that in the last few weeks there had been a “significant increase” in young people joining the party or volunteering to help. Since late yesterday, there had also been a notable rise in Facebook “likes” from younger people.

Day 2: It’s your turn to tweet, Rupert

Michelle Grattan

6 August 2013

It’s hard to imagine Rupert Murdoch sitting on Twitter, isn’t it? But tweet he does, and today Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his deputy Anthony Albanese tweeted back. For “tweet” and “tweeted” in that sentence, substitute “punch” and “punched”.

The brawl started with Murdoch’s: “Oz politics! We all like ideal of NBN, especially perfect for Foxtel. But first how can it be financed in present situation?”

This prompted Albanese, now in charge of NBN, to tweet: “Our NBN plan will deliver affordable high speed broadband to every home and business and produce a solid rate of return.”

This had Rudd (who incidentally has 1,309,250 followers to Rupert’s 456,452) chiming in: “100% agree @AlboMP. That might be Mr Murdoch’s view in New York. Here in Oz I want high speed NBN for all, not just some.”

Murdoch and his News Corporation and Rudd are at war in this campaign.

As he tries, against the odds, to survive this election, Rudd has every reason to be worried about the potential impact of the Murdoch press, especially the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, where

the ALP is desperately attempting to hang on to seats and the *Courier Mail* in Queensland, where Labor needs to win them.

The Telegraph's headline after the election was called — “Finally, you now have the chance to ... KICK THIS MOB OUT” — spurred an enormous amount of debate. But there have been plenty of other in-your-face headlines in the tabloids.

The Australian has been relentlessly critical of the returned Rudd.

This is despite the once-close personal friendship between him and *Australian* editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell.

(Rudd has hired as his adviser on media strategy the well-respected former chief political correspondent of *The Australian*, Matthew Franklin, who must find the drop-in on the News stable somewhat character-forming as he does his press gallery rounds.)

Media watchers predicted that Rudd was in for extra tabloid fire when Col Allan, Murdoch hard-hitter who is editor-in-chief of the *New York Post*, returned recently to help out editorially. (Allan was the one who took Rudd, then opposition leader, for a drunken evening to the Scores nightclub in New York.)

Conservative commentator Paul Sheehan wrote in Fairfax Media a couple of days ago that there were not just political but commercial motives afoot. News Corp viewed the NBN: “as a threat to the business model of its most important Australian asset, Foxtel, jointly owned with Telstra. The company much prefers the Coalition’s less costly but also less ambitious national broadband strategy.”

Rudd didn’t hold back today: “Mr Murdoch is entitled to his view. It is a democracy, it is a free press. He owns 70% of the newspapers in this country.

“I think he’s made it fairly clear ... that he doesn’t really like us and would like to give us the heave-ho and would like to get rid of us and get his mate Mr Abbott in.

“The bottom line is — it is for others to ask the question why Mr Murdoch really doesn’t want the National Broadband

Network to be connected to everyone's homes and everyone's small business premises. Does he sense it represents a commercial challenge to Foxtel, which is a major cash cow for his company, or not?"

The prime minister added a sarcastic slapdown — he was sure Murdoch saw things “with crystal clear clarity all the way from the United States”.

News in a statement today quickly denied the interests of Foxtel were having any influence on coverage: “Any suggestion that the editorial position of our newspapers is based upon the commercial interests of Foxtel demonstrates a complete ignorance of both our business and of Foxtel.

“The general News business would benefit from faster national broadband speeds and Foxtel will benefit as it will be able to offer more choice and new services to consumers.”

Labor has had some dramatic fights with the Murdoch media in the distant and near past. Murdoch (well known for his interventions in British politics and US politics) was a great supporter of Gough Whitlam's election in 1972; in 1975 he ran a trenchant campaign against him — journalists on *The Australian* went on strike because of the coverage.

Fast forward to Julia Gillard, who got a rough time from the Murdoch stable. This probably led her to go in harder than was good for her in the wake of the British phone hacking scandal, when she said: “I do believe that Australians watching all of that happening overseas with News Corp are looking at News Ltd here and are wanting to see News Ltd answer some hard questions.”

Her government set up an inquiry into the newspaper industry, which made some strong recommendations. Communications minister Stephen Conroy later brought in legislation with much watered-down provisions. Late and ill-prepared, the bills failed to get crossbench support. But News and other sections of the media reacted with a massive campaign.

Rudd calculates he has nothing to lose in his attacks on Murdoch. If he thought he could win him over, you can bet he

would be mounting a charm offensive. Rudd can only hope that he can deliver his message adequately via TV and social media.

But he is using strictly small arms fire against the mogul. Labor learned tough lessons from Conroy's sortie with even mild proposals to stop further concentration and beef up the newspaper industry's voluntary watchdog.

When a journalist from *The Australian* today asked whether he had any plans to change the media laws if re-elected, Rudd was categorical: "We have no such plans at all."

There will be many policy issues in this campaign, but they won't include media policy, despite the serious and continuing shrinkage of diversity in the newspaper industry.

Day 3: Parties bring candidate problems on themselves

Michelle Grattan

7 August 2013

There are only 150 seats in the House of Representatives. You would think it would not be beyond the wit and wisdom of the major parties, which fight to be the government, to choose good, or at least appropriate, candidates — and to get rid of those found to be bad ones.

Unfortunately, it seems to be, as we (and they) are being reminded.

The Liberals have been embarrassed by their candidate for the western Sydney seat of Greenway, Jaymes Diaz. The video of an excruciating performance in which Diaz could not spell out the detail of the opposition's asylum seeker policy has gone viral this week. The grilling by the Ten Network reporter was very tough, but this wasn't a case of giving a political innocent a hard time. Diaz stood for this seat in 2010.

Then today Craig Thomson, the bane of Labor for the past term, was in the news, with deputy prime minister Anthony Albanese photographed with the former ALP MP who ended up on the crossbench for his sins.

The opposition leapt on the Albanese–Thomson encounter; Joe Hockey suggested Labor was “doing secret deals to try and run a minority government now and into the future”.

This was far-fetched even for the “say anything” atmosphere of an election campaign. Thomson is running as an independent in his central NSW coast seat of Dobell, presumably to get severance pay. But he won’t be around in the next parliament, whether it’s hung or unhung. He does have preferences to allocate (presumably not many) but he tells *The Conversation* he did not discuss preferences with Albo.

Albanese said they were just having a drink: “What happened last night is I was having a beer with someone I work with. Craig Thomson was in the building. He came along for a beer. A personal chat. That is all. No big deal. Hold the front page — Albo likes a beer after work. It was one beer. We were there for about ten minutes.

“The fact is as Leader of the House, I talk to a whole range of people all the time.... I’ll give you a big scoop — I have had a beer and been to the footy with Joe Hockey as well.

“I think it’s good that parliamentarians from across the spectrum can have a chat and can engage in a way which is away from the differences that might be there politically.”

The problem is less these incidents themselves — candidates do stumble and a beer with Craig is no big deal, albeit an unfortunate look — than the fact that Diaz should not be a Liberal candidate now and Thomson should not have been a Labor one in 2010.

How the Liberals, including Abbott, have brought the Diaz problem on themselves has been documented by journalist Heath Aston.

Diaz and his father are migration agents and prominent in the Filipino community and the local area. Diaz ran for the seat (held by the ALP's Michelle Rowland) last time, losing by only about 700 votes. He brought a lot of his own money to that campaign and was very anxious to stand again in the seat, which is controlled by the party's right.

Abbott knew that he should not be selected again for this target electorate, which is on 0.9% and needs a tip-top candidate; he cogitated on the problem but in the end was unable or unwilling to do anything about it. The joys of local preselection combined with the problems of a factionalised NSW party.

When Kevin Rudd was asked on Tuesday about the Diaz performance he gave a very mild-mannered reply: "I understand the Liberal candidate for Greenway had a few challenges yesterday. I'm sure some of ours will at some stage or another.

"That's just life in an electoral campaign. If you've been through as many as I have you've seen anything happen."

In 2010, Rudd and the ALP knew, or ought to have known, that Thomson should be dumped after allegations came out in 2009 about his rorting while a union official. Yet he was re-endorsed in a local ballot in 2010 (before Rudd lost the leadership).

After going through the Thomson experience you would think Labor would have got a good candidate in place long ago in Dobell, on a margin of 5.1%. But it was only late today that the party named Emma McBride, a hospital pharmacologist and daughter of a former state minister, to run for it.

Earlier today Rudd, asked why Labor did not have a candidate there, said that there were a "number of possibilities for that seat". The prime minister reportedly had tried unsuccessfully to get his former economic adviser Andrew Charlton to contest but Charlton is probably quite good at calculating the probability of victory.

The voters of Greenway and Dobell deserve more respect than they have been receiving from the Liberal and Labor parties respectively.

Postscript — Polling: It is understood private Liberal polling this week has found the Coalition losing three Queensland seats (Brisbane, Forde, Bonner) and Hasluck in WA, while winning in five to six NSW seats (apart from those in which the two country independents are retiring), two to three Victorian seats, and two to three Tasmanian seats.

Day 4: Peter Beattie is here to help

Michelle Grattan

8 August 2013

Kevin Rudd has done well to recruit Peter Beattie. Just as Bob Carr was a good catch for Julia Gillard. There is nothing wrong with a bit of recycling in politics, provided that, as with other products, the initial quality was good. Anyway, the prime minister is “pre-loved”. Vintage is in.

Beattie would surely have to be a shoo-in for Forde, which is on 1.6%, although naturally Beattie is claiming underdog status (it’s hard to find people willing to call themselves top dogs in this election). The LNP member, Bert Van Manen, has only had one term in the seat.

The populist, so-Queensland Beattie, 60, should help Labor’s vote generally in the state that is so vital for the ALP. The government must pick up seats there (and quite a few of them) to offset losses elsewhere.

But Kevin’s Peter coup is also hilarious. Two years ago Beattie, asked about reports he was looking for a federal seat, said at 58 he was too old for a comeback, had no interest in getting back into politics and anyway, his wife would murder him. And then there are the many harsh things he has said about Rudd’s judgement and disloyalty, his prediction that he would “never again get the numbers in caucus to be prime minister”, and his advice that Rudd should quit at a byelection.

Everyone could have a good joke at this Rudd stroke. Liberal pollster Mark Textor quoted Monty Python, tweeting: “Bring out your dead!”; someone with the Twitter handle “@DocEvatt” said: “Hey @KRuddMP just letting you know I’m not up to much these days if you need a candidate for the seat of Barton”.

Rudd opened the joint news conference in typical cheesy style: “I’m Kevin. I’m from Queensland and I’m here to help. His name’s Peter, he’s from Queensland, and he’s here to help as well.”

Rudd and Beattie (PB, as Rudd called him) could only take the high moral ground in relation to their previous differences.

All those old quotes were “water off a duck’s back”, Rudd said pre-emptively, knowing the Liberals had handed out the quotes to journalists. “What really matters is standing up for Queensland.... What unites us as a team are our core and continuing values.”

Beattie said it was “a measure of the prime minister’s leadership that he was prepared to put that aside, approach me directly in the interests of what he thought, and I agreed with him, was the best chance of winning this seat.... It takes a bit of strength and a bit of guts from the prime minister to rise above that.” And he was “delighted” that Rudd had not accepted his advice to leave parliament.

Beattie has quickly fitted into the Rudd style of doing everything yesterday. Approached a couple of nights ago, he moved into the electorate this morning. Happily, his brother lives there. “I’ve been close to my brother for a long period of time. I have moved into his house. He is currently away.”

The former successful premier (in office 1998 to 2007, when he handed over to Anna Bligh) said one reason he was re-entering politics because “I want to see Queensland get a fair go”.

It was a matter of balance: “The Labor Party has seven seats in the state parliament. We have eight seats in the federal parliament. That’s simply not fair.”

Not fair? You can see what he's getting at but it is a matter of Labor having performed poorly at elections rather than a question of justice.

According to sources, ALP and Liberal research on Forde differed before the surprise new Labor candidate. Labor says it was not travelling well with then-candidate Des Hardman. But it is understood Liberal research showed a likely loss for the LNP member Bert Van Manen.

Tony Abbott described Beattie as “another flim-flam man, who hit people with debt and deficit, [who] is just going to add to the leadership instability inside the Labor party. You might say to me, am I worried about Peter Beattie? Of course not. But I bet Kevin Rudd is.”

Shadow attorney-general George Brandis, a Queenslander, hyperventilated, describing Beattie as a “blow in” and “carpetbagger” in running for this seat, a bit of a stretch when the man had been premier of the state for the best part of a decade. Brandis added: “I’ve had a number of conversations with him about Mr Rudd”; the relationship was “poisonous” and “toxic.”

Beattie promises that if elected, he would serve a full term. Bob Carr has said the same (and he is standing for a six-year term). If Labor goes into opposition, almost certainly Carr would be out of parliament fairly soon. It’s easier for a senator than for a House of Representative member.

Beattie surely would have to stay. So would he be in the increasingly complicated leadership equation of a Labor opposition? Probably not (though always dangerous to predict). Opposition would be a hard slog, which no doubt has gone through Beattie’s mind.

I might be wrong, but to me Beattie had the look of a man slightly put upon. Or maybe he was just exhausted. He flew in early this morning from the United States where he has an honorary position with Clemson University in South Carolina, providing advice on liaison with universities in Queensland about research opportunities.

Is he really looking forward to weeks of foot slogging, doorknocking, defending his state record, explaining his new rapprochement with Rudd and all the rest? He has come to the aid of the party, but he is probably wondering, what will it do to his life?

Day 5: Rupert Murdoch IS the news

Michelle Grattan

9 August 2013

When leaders take on media moguls, it always makes for a spicy story. When the characters are Kevin Rudd and Rupert Murdoch, one hangs out for the next episode.

In the Labor camp, a few people must be holding their breaths as Rudd escalates the battle. In News, Murdoch has other issues than the attacks coming from the prime minister.

The as-yet-unexplained resignation today of Kim Williams, chief executive of News Corp Australia, signals some turmoil in the organisation.

In his email to staff, Williams said: "It is certainly not a decision made lightly, or without an awareness of the impact decisions like this inevitably have on many close colleagues, clients and diverse bodies within the media community."

That is like a mystery clue. Industry sources say there was a power struggle for Murdoch's support. Obviously Williams lost out. But we know little of the detail.

Chief executive of News Corp Robert Thomson said that Williams thought it was the "right moment" to leave (right for whom, exactly?) but it is certainly an awkward moment, just when News is under a lot of public scrutiny for its coverage of this election campaign.

Williams, who came from Foxtel, has been the square peg. He has not been regarded by the News editorial hierarchy as knowing much about newspapers. They were unimpressed by his push for copy sharing across the group, and his wish to get stories up online first. As one source put it, “he didn’t understand the culture”.

Andrew Crook reported in *Crikey* that News journalist Piers Akerman had been highly critical of Williams, complaining around the place that the company was being run by consultants, like Fairfax.

When you are a political leader and Murdoch’s against you, there are three possible responses. Grin, or grimace, and bear it. Try to be accommodating. Or take him on.

Rudd has been doing the latter all week, declaring that Murdoch wants to see him out of office and Tony Abbott installed and that he is trying to protect Foxtel’s interests from the NBN.

On the NBN claim, the counter-argument, put by News and Telstra, which co-own Foxtel, is that the NBN would benefit Foxtel.

Rudd, however, today pressed his line on Murdoch’s commercial conflict of interest, pointing out that the opposition’s broadband policy would connect fibre only to the node, so people would have to rely on copper wire from the node to the home: “If you’re relying on copper ... you’re not going to be able to access movies from the source.”

Today Rudd went a lot further than earlier in targeting Murdoch (although the prime minister wants to be seen as the victim). He said News editors had been summoned to a meeting in Sydney last week with Col Allan, Murdoch’s hard man who is back from New York (where he is editor-in-chief of the *New York Post*) to help out editorially for a while.

“What we know from that meeting ... is that the message delivered very clearly was to them, ‘Go hard on Rudd, start from Sunday and don’t back off’”

If Rudd's account is accurate, the editors have done their best to please. Monday's *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney told people they had the chance to "KICK THIS MOB OUT". Then there was Thursday's *Telegraph*, following Anthony Albanese's beer with disgraced former Labor MP Craig Thomson, which depicted Rudd and Albanese as Nazis from *Hogan's Heroes*. Today's *Courier Mail*, after Peter Beattie's return to politics, had as its front page: "Send in the Clown".

Whether there is any connection between the Williams affair and the Rudd–Murdoch clash is unknown.

The *Australian Financial Review's* Neil Chenoweth argues that the recent editorial presentation reflects the dysfunction following the restructuring of the Murdoch empire, which separated it into two parts.

The side with the entertainment assets is functional but the print side is far from it. "News Corporation has a deep commercial interest in defeating the government and subverting the National Broadband Network but the anti-Labor campaign is driven by far more visceral impulses", Chenoweth writes. "News Corp Australia is locked in a bitter struggle, not with the age-old enemy Fairfax Media, but with itself.

"And the election coverage is merely an extension of that — each headline becomes a way of securing Rupert's approval.

"Allan's Thursday front page, photoshopping a scene from *Hogan's Heroes* from 1971, might be unintelligible to most of the *Tele's* audience, but it scores with the only demographic that matters — Rupert Murdoch."

Within the government, Williams is seen as being friendly towards Labor. Perhaps not surprising, since he is married to Gough Whitlam's daughter. And, just to square the circle, Whitlam came under huge attack from the Murdoch press in 1975.

Day 6: Social media and localism are being mobilised by high-profile independent in Indi

Michelle Grattan
10 August 2013

In Melbourne the “Indi expats” number about 30. They include nieces and nephews of Cathy McGowan, independent candidate for the north east Victorian seat, and relatives of family and friends.

The “Indi expats” recently booked out the Nova cinema in Carlton, raising thousands of dollars for McGowan’s campaign, and some are arriving in the electorate this weekend to help from now until polling day.

Social media is being mobilised in a big way in her campaign, spearheaded by the youth brigade. She says when she walks down the street: “I meet lots of young people who are ‘liking’ me and sharing me with their friends.”

McGowan is challenging the feisty Liberal frontbencher Sophie Mirabella, shadow minister for industry, described by retiring New England independent Tony Windsor as the person he would least miss on leaving parliament. Windsor offered to campaign but McGowan’s team wants to keep the focus grass-roots and local.

After the hung parliament this is not a good election to be seeking to join the crossbench. But the Indi contest is catching attention.

McGowan, 59, who operates a farm consultancy and has a 50-hectare property on which she runs dorper sheep, says a catalyst for her candidature was a call last year from a nephew and niece and their friends, who were all at a Melbourne dinner party.

The young ones were disenchanted, unhappy with politics, including what was happening in rural Australia, and feeling they

weren't being consulted. They wanted to know what she was doing for the election.

McGowan talked to others, helped get going a local "Voice for Indi" group, and held three months of "kitchen conversations" around the electorate: "Out of that there was a huge cry for me to stand."

She says people are disillusioned and disengaged, especially with "old century" politics based on joining parties. The desire now is for something "more flexible, lighter, using modern communications to get things done".

That leads to one of her main campaign pitches — the need for better broadband in Indi. At her campaign launch a week ago, attended by 400, she supported the current Labor fibre-to-the-home NBN plan.

McGowan, one of 13 children, grew up on a dairy farm in the Indigo Valley, near where she now lives. As well as the farming background, her family has deep roots in the professions. Her father was an agricultural scientist and consultant. In the district, one sister is a doctor, another a lawyer, and two are scientists. McGowan has an arts degree from Monash and a masters in agriculture and rural development from the University of Western Sydney.

Through the NGO Australian Women in Agriculture, which she helped found, she was involved in setting up a Papua New Guinea Women in Agriculture organisation, which is the largest farm group in that country, and she is working with the Indian government to host an international conference on women in agriculture. She has an AO for services to women in agriculture and rural communities.

Many years back, she worked in the office of a former Liberal member for Indi, Ewen Cameron.

The Liberals dismiss any threat to Mirabella, who is on a 9% margin (52.6% of the primary vote in 2010, with Labor on 27%). But the MP was embarrassed by the leak of an email from her office to party members urging them to write to the local media

because Mirabella was being “outgunned” there by McGowan. (The staff member responsible was described by Mirabella as an “overly passionate young campaigner”, who had been “counselled”).

Mirabella told *The Conversation* today: “I’ll run on my record and what I can do.” Asked whether Tony Abbott would visit her seat, she said: “I can’t disclose his itinerary.”

After the staffer’s email was leaked, Malcolm Fraser tweeted “Vote for the independent”. He said today: “I just thought she sounded good.”

Nationals’ Joyce (who was facing Windsor until he decided to retire) told *The Conversation*: “I know how independents campaign. You’ve got to take it seriously.

“The independent brand works on this theory: it puts a group of people who are not in support of the Coalition in one camp — from One Nation to the Greens. With the Labor vote, that can add to about 40%. So they start in a strong position — and then try to entice one in six of the rest to support them.” He says they come up with messages that are seen as “clearly partisan to regional areas” and have the advantage of not having to deliver (unless there is a hung parliament, it might be added).

Joyce, who will campaign for Mirabella, describes her as “a very tough lady”, courageous and always ready to man the barricades: “When you’re looking for allies in Canberra, so often the nice people, the easygoing people, duck for cover.”

“At times we get along very well, at times we fight,” Joyce admits — fights have been over voluntary student unionism (he was against) and the now-defunct referendum to recognise local government in the constitution (of which he was a strong supporter).

Di Thomas, editor of the *Border Mail*, which circulates in the electorate, says McGowan is “a significant challenge for Sophie — one she has not faced previously. Does Cathy have the potential to win? She may if there was a perfect storm of preferences [there will be about ten candidates]. But Sophie has really strong support.” More likely, Thomas believes, McGowan has the potential to pull back Mirabella’s margin considerably.

Day 7: The debate that did not grip the nation

Michelle Grattan

11 August 2013

Tonight's debate was not a debate. It was a joint news conference and a dull one at that. There was not the head-to-head exchanges and jousting that a genuine "debate" requires.

There was no knock out, no big break, though little new information. It's hard to see that anyone would change their vote on the basis of tonight, or even recall much of it in the morning.

Also, Rudd apparently broke the rules by using notes.

In my mind, Rudd narrowly "won" the encounter. But to get any benefit he needed to trounce his opponent. Moreover, the row about the Rudd notes was taking off tonight in the popular media. The last thing Rudd needs is the accusation that he cheated the system. That is gold for Abbott when the prime minister is already being ferociously pursued by the tabloid media.

On substance, Abbott was handicapped by what he was never going to do — that is, give his costings.

More significantly, he seems to be pledging that the GST would not be changed under a Coalition government. The Coalition policy is for a review of taxation in the first term, which would have the GST on the table, and then take any tax changes proposed to the following election.

Is Abbott now giving a longer-term commitment of no change? That is what he has seemed to be saying in recent days, and quite strongly tonight. This is something that needs clearing up.

The *Daily Telegraph* reporter on the panel, Simon Benson, asked a very Sydney-based question about Sydney airport, which Rudd treated dismissively. He said there were more airports in the country than Sydney, and more issues to the productivity agenda. How this plays out in Sydney remains to be seen.

Rudd, a recent convert to gay marriage, went hard on the issue, indicating there would be a bill brought forward in the first hundred days of a re-elected Labor government, with Labor MPs having a conscience vote. Abbott was able to say that his gay sister was in the audience but could not say yes to a conscience vote for Liberals. That would be up to the next party room, he said.

Abbott started the day of the leaders' debate by running a 14-kilometre City to Surf, acting as guide to a visually impaired man.

Exercise is, for Abbott, politically toning — all the better when combined with a good picture opportunity and a gesture of goodwill. And there was some Coalition money announced for life-saving thrown in.

For Rudd the campaign had hit a rugged patch by the weekend. Yesterday saw two ALP candidates bite the dust for bad behaviour. Ken Robertson in Kennedy (Bob Katter country) had accused Abbott of being bigoted and said he hoped Australia “never has to suffer his Catholicism”. There was little doubt he had to go.

But it was more complicated and contentious in Hotham (which Simon Crean is vacating). Labor candidate Geoff Lake once swore at a woman in a wheelchair during an altercation at a council meeting. The incident happened more than a decade ago, and has been well canvassed since.

Lake has served as the president of the Australian Local Government Association and the local government representative on the Council of Australian Governments. One would think if he were suitable to sit in COAG with state and federal leaders he would be okay to be a Labor candidate.

But when the incident made headlines in the *Herald Sun* (the Murdoch press again) it was all over for Lake. Rudd said in a statement that he had asked the party's national executive to remove Lake: “The national secretary has informed me that he is not satisfied that there has been that there has been full disclosure about these previous matters.”

Lake's dumping is an over-reaction from a campaign on the defensive.

Fortunately for Rudd (but unfortunately for Lake), this affair came early in the campaign; if it had arisen next weekend, with nominations closed, the ALP candidates would not have been able to be changed. That's what happened to the Liberals with Pauline Hanson in 1996 — she was dumped by the Liberal Party but stayed on the ballot paper with a Liberal tag, which helped her get across the line.

The weekend polls brought bad news for Rudd, with both the Nielsen and Galaxy polls showing him trailing.

There was also a feeling in Labor circles that he had not made the most of the first week's campaigning — that he had got sidetracked. The stoush with Rupert Murdoch was seen as unproductive. The scare campaign about the prospect of a GST under Abbott has not really got traction — except to the extent it has led to the opposition leader giving a commitment that, if he becomes prime minister, he might eventually regret.

Meanwhile, this day of the election campaign has reinforced the need for a Debates Commission.

Day 8: Howard's former seat once more in play

Michelle Grattan
12 August 2013

John Howard's old seat of Bennelong as Australia's Silicon Valley? That's the pitch by Labor's candidate Jason Yat-Sen Li.

Labor is mostly in defensive mode in NSW but it is also on the hunt for a couple of Liberal seats. One is Bennelong, which has changed hands in each of the last two elections, most dramatically when Maxine McKew seized it from the then-prime minister in

2007. In 2010, former tennis champ John Alexander won it back for the Liberals. He sits on a 3.1% margin.

Rudd, who was campaigning in Bennelong today, recruited the Chinese-Australian Li personally — in typical Kevin fashion. Li, based in Beijing, has a business advising Australian companies on operating in China. When Labor dumped then-candidate Jeff Salvestro-Martin because he was called to appear before the Independent Commission against Corruption, Rudd rang Li, who has been an ALP member since 1999, and put his Bennelong proposition — in Mandarin.

Li's wife Lucy is a close friend of Rudd's daughter Jessica; Li says his relationship with Rudd had been "good" but "not really close".

But Li — like Peter Beattie, who instantly jumped on a plane from the United States to contest the Queensland marginal Liberal seat of Forde — raced back and moved immediately into the electorate (where his brother-in-law has a chemist shop and his sister is starting a yoghurt shop).

Even if he loses, the 41-year-old Li, who stood for the Senate in 1998 to target Pauline Hanson's campaign, is relocating to Australia to pursue a parliamentary seat: "This is a long-term project for me."

Standing beside Rudd today, Li said: "We have a vision for Bennelong as the Silicon Valley of Australia, as a hub of innovation, economic growth and local jobs." He plans a conference at Macquarie University on August 28 "where we're bringing the best minds together to come up with a strategy to deliver that vision".

"I went to Silicon Valley last year. From a physical point of view, Bennelong is very similar", Li tells *The Conversation*. It has Macquarie University, CSIRO, and Macquarie Park, with companies including Optus and Foxtel. Microsoft is in the electorate: "It's also a great place to live, with big houses, big backyards."

Silicon Valley has Stanford University, companies including Apple, Google and Facebook, and is pretty nice residentially. Li is

hoping to get a speaker from Silicon Valley, an Aussie success story, to address the conference.

One twist in the Bennelong contest is that there is a popular local councillor in Ryde called Justin Li. It's possible that a few voters could think "Jason" on the ballot paper is Justin (who's not a candidate).

Alexander, 62, hasn't had a high profile in Canberra Liberal politics but has been active on the ground and is said to have a good local organisation. Today he had Malcolm Turnbull in the electorate to launch a campaign office in Ryde.

In this very Asianised electorate, Alexander started a table tennis program, which put tables in the area's 40 schools. "We could see that kids of Chinese and Korean backgrounds were left off the sports field because they don't play football and cricket," Alexander says.

This led to the "Bennelong Cup Table Tennis Test Match", involving the Australian Olympic team and the Korean men's and Chinese women's teams, played in Bennelong. This year the Japanese are being brought into the tournament.

At the first international sporting event ever played in Parliament Great Hall, top Australians, Chinese and Koreans competed; the Korean and Chinese ambassadors, Alexander and then-sports minister Kate Lundy has a hit at doubles. He said: "I was at the other end to Kate and we rallied quite nicely."

Asked how the battle for Bennelong is going Alexander says: "We're working very hard." One thing his tennis career taught him was "knowing how to compete", which boils down to concentrating on doing your best and not worrying about other things.

Meanwhile, the former member for Bennelong is back on the campaign trail elsewhere, with a very full program for this election.

Howard last week appeared in the marginal Labor seats of Dobell (Craig Thomson country) and Robertson on the NSW central coast — the Liberals should win both, he says (despite

some Labor polling showing the ALP doing unexpectedly well in Dobell). He has been with Liberal frontbencher Bruce Billson in Dunkley (Victoria), is booked in to visit Liberal MP Ken Wyatt in Hasluck (WA), and will do quite a bit of campaigning in Queensland. In general, he will be concentrating most on marginal Labor seats. And then there are the private fundraisers for sitting members.

Howard says he has had “a mountain of requests from members” and Tony Abbott and Liberal federal director Brian Loughnane have been very keen for him to assist. “I enjoy doing a bit of hand-to-hand combat again,” he tells *The Conversation*.

He is not planning to get involved in Bennelong “because the Liberal Party doesn’t regard it as a seat at risk”. But Alexander says: “John is always welcome — we are expecting him to come and help us shortly.”

Day 9: Labor struggles, despite Abbott’s gaffe

Michelle Grattan

13 August 2013

Former ministers — those who backed Julia Gillard — are very “former” in this campaign. Some of them, such as Greg Combet and Craig Emerson — are heading for post-parliamentary life. Senator Stephen Conroy, who doesn’t face the people for another three years, is on a trip to the United States.

But ex-treasurer Wayne Swan is beavering away in his Queensland marginal seat of Lilley (3.2%), with some excursions to help colleagues elsewhere. No longer the man who fronts the news conferences or releases the weekly treasurer’s note, Swan nevertheless has a bit to say on the national economic debate. Via Twitter.

The release today of PEFO — the Pre-election Economic and Fiscal Outlook for those not on acronym terms with this Treasury/Finance department document — had Swan tweeting that it “exposes Lib’s economic scaremongering”, and recommending an article by *The Age’s* Tim Colebatch. And: “Today’s release of PEFO is D-Day for @TonyAbbottMHR & @JoeHockey. Must reveal size of blackhole (\$73 B+) and the cuts they’d make to fill.”

Swan has lost none of his sharpness, which critics see as his pursuit of a class war. After a story in *The Australian* reporting business attacks on the government, he tweeted: “Surprise, surprise ... so called business leaders (Lib tin rattlers) talking economy down on front page.” This was followed by: “These tin rattlers for the conservatives shamelessly push Abbott’s agenda of jacking up the GST & ripping away fair IR laws.”

On another day, he tweeted: “BCA at it again, doing the bidding for Lib’s wage cutting agenda under the guise of ‘productivity reform.’”

Since Kevin Rudd’s return the BCA has been brought into the sun, with the prime minister having a series of meetings with it and the ACTU on productivity. But the BCA remains critical.

Swan told *The Conversation* he doesn’t miss PEFO but “I maintain an interest in what’s going on” in the national scene.

Back among the main players, the face-offs over costings and debates are testing political judgement and nerve.

PEFO’s projections were the same as in the economic statement (except for the surplus in 2016–17, for which PEFO has \$4.2 billion and the statement \$4 billion). It must be a relief to Treasury, much criticised for its forecasts, that it can hold its numbers for 11 days.

PEFO reinforced the message that the outlook is gloomy but it was not “new” news, because it has all been in the economic statement. That provided a cushion for the government. Behind the scenes, however, the Liberals are already starting to worry about the economic problems they will have if they win, and how to deal with them.

The government is right that there is no excuse now for the opposition (which reluctantly accepts there aren't better numbers than PEFO) not to release its costings ASAP. But the Coalition sees advantage in holding out as long as it can get away with it. It threw up various excuses: it needs time studying PEFO; it's waiting for numbers from the Parliamentary Budget Office.

The Coalition is feeling more confident — even while compromising its policy credibility by ruling out ever changing the GST, although promising a full tax inquiry.

Labor is becoming less confident. Rudd this week is pushing hard his skills agenda, with dollops of money. The story line is that we need a better skilled workforce as we move to the post-mining boom economy. But, vital as it is, the skills agenda is hard to make gripping for the voters.

Labor had hoped to get a fillip from the debate; instead, Abbott did better than the ALP expected. And in a Labor campaign that is presidential, the leader is looking tired as he dashes around. Abbott also has a natural advantage here — he has an athlete's level of fitness and physical stamina.

Rudd now finds himself caught on the debates front. After calling for debates with Abbott everywhere, he's got a dilemma with a forum to be run by Sky TV in Brisbane next week. The idea is that they would both be on the stage together. Abbott has accepted. Rudd doesn't want to do it (he would prefer formal debates organised by the commercial channels). Sky says the forum will go ahead regardless. What does Rudd do? Hard not to turn up.

(Concerned about Sky getting too many breaks the ABC's Mark Scott today wrote to the campaign directors proposing an ABC-hosted Regional Australia-focused debate, making sure issues outside the capital cities are discussed.)

Abbott likes the community forums, because they get the public involved (rather than just those pesky journalists). Perhaps they better bring out the "real Tony".

The “real Tony” broke through today — too much. Campaigning out in Sydney’s west, he was asked what the candidate for Lindsay, Fiona Scott, had in common with the former member for Lindsay, Jackie Kelly. “They’re young, they’re feisty. I think I can probably say have a bit of sex appeal. And they’re just very very connected with the local area.” (The knockabout Kelly was always a favourite and friend of Abbott’s.)

For Abbott, the remark was particularly ill-judged, because it will be used to validate critics’ opinions of his attitude to women. Later he said he had been “a bit exuberant”. Seeking some bright side, Liberal sources said Scott, trying to wrest a marginal seat from Labor, had got a lot of publicity.

Day 10: Queensland preference negotiations crucial for Katter Party’s senate hopes

Michelle Grattan
14 August 2013

Preferences are the auxiliary batteries of politics. They give an extra boost to supplement parties’ and candidates’ primary power supplies. Their bestowal or denial can make the difference between political life and death.

In the decision to preference against the Greens, the Liberals are not just trying to drive Greens deputy leader Adam Bandt out of the House of Representatives, but also to polarise the election.

It’s an unsurprising decision, after the Victorian Liberals preferred against the Greens in 2010. But it is significant that Abbott took personal ownership of the issue — declaring he had made a “captain’s call” — rather than have the party organisation handle it.

He wants to be cast as the “Green Slayer” (the headline in Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*). The Greens are a good enemy to be seen confronting. The Coalition’s base hates them and they can be used to symbolise and demonise all that voters didn’t like about the hung parliament.

Rudd is well aware of how much the Gillard-Greens deal cost Labor politically. He said today he would not conclude any formal agreement with the Greens or independents if he found himself in a minority government situation. (It’s clear he would, however, seek to hold power.)

As for preferences, all those “are handled by the national secretary ... I’m not aware of what agreements have been reached”. In the seat of Melbourne, Labor preferences are only of academic interest — they won’t be distributed.

Meanwhile, although less in the spotlight, in Queensland intense preference negotiations are underway that are potentially crucial to whether Bob Katter gets a Senate candidate elected.

Whether microparties succeed in winning Senate places depends on the auxiliary batteries. In Victoria, former Family First senator Steve Fielding got in on a 1.9% primary vote, and current DLP senator John Madigan received only 2.3%.

According to ABC election analyst Antony Green, the last Queensland Senate place is most likely to be fought out between Katter’s Australian Party and the Greens (Green discounts the chances of Labor or the Palmer United Party).

Green gives KAP’s James Blundell, a name in Queensland through his singing, a “reasonable chance” of winning, believing KAP will poll well enough “to keep its head above the flood line of other microparties”, although it can be a lottery, given the number on the Senate ballot paper and the vagaries of the placement draw.

“I think he will get the Coalition’s surplus. It’s a matter of whether Labor puts Katter or the Greens next. There may be a cross-negotiation based on what happens in the lower house,”

Green says. “Labor will want preferences somewhere in the House in Queensland and Katter probably has more to offer Labor in the House than do the Greens.”

In its negotiations for Senate preferences (which must be registered by Saturday) KAP’s own first priority is to try to aggregate support from other minnows.

Depending on how the contests go elsewhere, there is a chance that if Blundell wins, he could find himself sharing balance of power in the Senate. (With Peter Garrett retiring, it would be a case of the parliament losing rock and gaining country.)

Born in the Stanthorpe district of south east Queensland, Blundell works the family’s 5000-acre sheep and cattle property, spending about three months of the year on the road. Katter first approached him for the 2012 state election but Blundell told him he couldn’t hold public office because he was serving out a bankruptcy (which followed the collapse of his independent label recording enterprise). Instead, he wrote Katter a campaign song — “Give Bob the Job”.

“I got to know him personally. I developed an affection for him and his capacity for thought,” Blundell told *The Conversation*.

“Six months ago I received a series of phone calls from him. He said: ‘I want you to run for the Senate’.

“He’d been listening to what I was saying [in music — for example, Blundell’s ‘Ring Around the Moon’ celebrates the highs and lows of country life]. It came down to Bob saying ‘there is the opportunity to expound your point of view if you’re ballsy enough to take it on.’”

For the 48-year-old singer-cum-pastoralist, Katter has become a personal as well as political mentor. When earlier this year he had some problems, “Bob turned up to make sure things were stable.”

Blundell had been been a Nationals voter (he was approached by the National party about 20 years ago to be a candidate but wasn't interested). He says he was disillusioned with the "two party system" and "Bob was a voice in the wilderness". He appealed as having "an experienced logic as opposed to an ideological grip on life".

Blundell says young people respect Katter because "he represents taking a stance. When you bring Bob's name up people smile. Without fail they will say, 'at least he tells the truth'."

Blundell has been singing his way round some of the campaign trail, pulling in at country town pubs and starting to play a few numbers. His issues, he says, are "food security, job security and getting the dollar down". And he's "all for foreign investment, vehemently opposed to foreign ownership".

He admits he struggles on questions (such as penalty rates) where he can see both sides of the argument. He reserves his final position on gay marriage, but thinks the discussion takes up too much public time. On Abbott's "sex appeal" comment about a Liberal candidate, he can understand that the opposition leader would be appalled "that it could be taken as derogatory" but believes it shouldn't have been made.

In general political positioning: "Thirty years of travel and music have taken me from a very conservative viewpoint to a more balanced one."

Thinking about the possibility of being in a balance of power situation: "The only thing I've been concerned about is where your vote is the deciding one".

But then Bob would be there to give the lead.

Day 11: Brother and sister play careful family politics on gay marriage

Michelle Grattan
15 August 2013

Sometimes it's hard being a sister. Take Christine Forster, the gay sibling of Tony Abbott, who is promoting same sex marriage, an issue that is giving the opposition leader grief, while she remains one of his loyalist supporters.

Today, Forster was due to attend the Australian Marriage Equality's election campaign launch in Sydney. But she pulled out after Abbott's comment on Wednesday that "I'm not someone who wants to see radical changes based on the fashion of the moment".

"I didn't want to be the centre of media attention," Forster told *The Conversation*: "That would have been a distraction from the central marriage equality campaign."

Instead, she sent a strong message that can be interpreted — without too much of a stretch — as saying she would keep up the battle on the family front.

"Marriage equality is not an issue of right or left," it said. "If the Coalition wins ... I would like to see it engage in open debate which would hopefully lead to a conscience vote on the issue, just as has occurred in the Conservative Party in the UK and the National Party in New Zealand.

"There are a growing number of us in the Liberal Party who are working to make marriage equality a reality. Our approach is to engage in a constructive way with those who hold a different view".

Forster, a Liberal City of Sydney councillor and a journalist working for a publication covering the oil and gas industry, was

in the audience at Sunday's debate, as Abbott pointed out, when the marriage equality question put him on the spot.

Abbott refused to allow a conscience vote on gay marriage this term, but some time ago said that whether there is one in the next parliament will be up to the party room.

Given overseas trends and Australian public opinion, it is hard to see the party room, despite its likely conservative make up, not approving a free vote. (An Essential Research poll in May found 58% saying people of the same sex should be allowed to marry; only 32% opposed.)

Abbott this week implied the issue might not necessarily come up again quickly in parliament. In his dreams. If there was a Coalition government, a private member's bill from Labor or the Greens would be certain and any attempt to stop it being tested would be counterproductive.

The gay marriage lobby has been one of the most well-organised and persistent in contemporary Australian politics. Its supporters have popped up constantly to ask a question whenever they can get at leaders, ministers and opposition frontbenchers.

Even though the hung parliament did not deliver a legislative change, it advanced the cause because Green and Labor private members' initiatives became a focus of attention.

The 2011 ALP conference changed Labor's policy, to support marriage equality (while also allowing ALP MPs a free parliamentary vote). That allowed cabinet minister Penny Wong, who is in a gay relationship and has a young child, and other ministerial advocates to speak out publicly.

The issue's heightened profile (plus Christine's nagging, no doubt — she “has argued with me until she is blue in the face”) led to Abbott's statement about the party's say.

Kevin Rudd, previously opposed to gay marriage, did his Damascus road conversion just before he seized back the leadership. He is now running hard on the issue, in the debate promising

a bill in the first 100 days of a re-elected Labor government to legislate gay marriage (still with a Labor conscience vote).

Today, Australian Marriage Equality announced a mega campaign. The American-based ice cream company Ben and Jerry's is partnering with AME to run a social media and shop front effort.

Ben and Jerry's has long supported the cause, as part of a wider agenda of gay rights and social justice. Its site says that in 2009 it renamed its iconic Chubby Hubby flavour to support the same sex marriage law passed in the US state of Vermont: it offered scoops of "Hubby Hubby". Last year in Britain it created "Apple-y Ever After" as part of the campaign to legalise gay marriage. British legislation was passed this year.

The gay marriage lobby's campaign includes a website with the positions of most candidates; there is a large-scale social media blitz. Leaflets will be distributed to half a million voters in seven inner city seats: Brisbane, Perth, Curtin, Sturt, North Sydney, Wills, and Batman.

Tony and Christine have rather different views on the prospects for gay marriage becoming the law in Australia.

He said on Wednesday: "If this country lasts a thousand years quite possibly at some point we might be a republic, but I don't think a republic is inevitable any time soon and similarly I don't see same sex marriages as inevitable."

But Christine predicts there will be a strong push up from the community during the next term. Given the 42–98 defeat last time, even allowing that Coalition MPs were "bound", she thinks it might take another term to win the battle: "It's hard to predict given that we don't yet know the make-up of the incoming parliament, but I'd like to think it would get up in the next term."

They both agree on one thing. She will stay in her brother's ear.

Day 12: The old Rudd is reappearing on the campaign trail

Michelle Grattan
16 August 2013

The best way of looking at this election is as a contest between voters' long-standing desire to get rid of the Labor government and their personal warmth towards Kevin Rudd.

At the end of Week 2, the first is prevailing over the second. Things can change in the next three weeks, but as of now they are bad for Rudd, as people are reassessing him.

In a poll the *Australian Financial Review* put online this afternoon, star candidate Petter Beattie is getting trounced in the Queensland seat of Forde. The Liberals are on a primary vote of 54% to Labor's 33%; their two-party lead is 60% to 40%.

Remember that Queensland is the state where Labor must make gains. It's Rudd's home ground; Beattie is a former premier.

Polling published today by *The Australian* showed the Liberals set to take the NSW central coast seats of Dobell and Robertson; a *Guardian* Lonergan poll has them winning in a landslide in the western Sydney seat of Lindsay (the poll was taking the night after Tony Abbott's assessment that candidate Fiona Scott had sex appeal — it probably helped her).

The Labor campaign is looking frayed. Rudd is showing signs of the faults that his colleagues used to criticise so strongly. This is serious when Labor is running a presidential pitch that needs the leader to be as flawless as possible.

The reinstated Rudd promised ad nauseam that he would be more consultative, but this seems to have fallen away. Campaign strain and logistics make old habits hard to break. The first question Rudd faced at his Perth news conference today was how widely he'd consulted about his Northern Australia policy,

with its proposed drop in the company tax rate for companies headquartered in the NT.

He had worked with the treasurer, finance minister and the broader leadership group, Rudd said.

Resources minister Gary Gray wasn't in the loop. Rudd said one would expect that during an election campaign, "when the final product of a policy is put out ... the ministers are informed of that at that time".

Asked whether it looked like policy on the run, Rudd was dismissive of "process": "If you think that it's about an internal debate about processes ... I'm not going there.

"I'm proud of what we've put forward. It's proffering a clear direction for the future. You can have as many process debates as you like."

The tone was defiant. Given Rudd's wish to run things his way, it's easy to imagine how tough it must be getting for the campaign team, both the travelling crew and in Labor's headquarters, located in Melbourne.

That location, incidentally, decided in Julia Gillard's time, has added to the inconvenience. All the action is in NSW and Queensland. Then there's the more serious problem that the campaign's foundations were put in place before Rudd took over and have had to be adapted to the new circumstances and style.

One small example of Rudd's approach is instructive: he summoned Mike Kelly, whom he has named as future defence minister if Labor is re-elected, to Darwin this week for the prime ministerial visit to the troops.

Kelly is the member for the bellwether seat of Eden-Monaro, which is said to be in nail-biting territory. His presence in Darwin wasn't essential. He would have been better off campaigning at home.

Rudd spent much of this week flying long distances, from north Queensland, to Darwin, Kununurra and Perth. Yet in the NT and WA there are only a handful of seats in it either way, nothing compared with NSW and Queensland.

This limited communications between the travelling party and the campaign team on the ground. (While Rudd can make calls from the plane the general communications are not Air Force One standard!) “He’s hard to connect with on the road,” one campaigner said. “The best way of connection is to jump on the plane.”

ALP national secretary George Wright had to fly north so he could have discussions with Rudd — in the air. That wastes a lot of Wright’s time — and he’s the man with overall charge of the campaign.

(Again, Rudd has reverted to an old practice — documented in *Speechless*, by James Button, who wrote speeches for Rudd — of scheduling meetings during plane trips.)

Rudd and Wright are opposites: Rudd mercurial and highly mobile in tactics, while Wright is much more into process and organisation. Wright, formerly with the ACTU and a key player in the campaign against WorkChoices, was in Rudd’s office for a time during his first prime ministership. He couldn’t put up with it and left.

Leaders often find it hard not to default to an earlier campaign. Rudd, it seems to some in the Labor camp, still has the Kevin ’07 mindset, when he rode to victory on a cloud of optimism, a fresh face and a new product. Now he has recycled goods with faults that voters can be made to recall.

Labor has taken an early hit from a well-heeled Coalition advertising campaign. As a result, the ALP this week brought forward its advertising buy. It has put its finger heavily on the negative button, homing in on Abbott “hiding” planned cuts.

The ALP has appealed to its supporters in Queensland for personal anecdotal material about how they have suffered under Campbell Newman (being portrayed by Labor as the entree to the Abbott main course).

An email sent out from Wright this week said: “As a Queenslander living under Campbell Newman, you know what’s

in store for the rest of the country if Tony Abbott has his way and cuts essential jobs and services. Share your story below, to let the rest of Australia know what life under the Liberals' austerity really means.”

Rudd started his second prime ministership elevating the positive and contrasting this with Abbott's negativity.

But now Labor has to pin its dwindling hopes on the dark side. If it can't inspire the voters with Rudd, it has to try to terrify them with the prospect of Abbott.

Day 13: Greg Rudd tells his brother “stop being so much a politician”

Michelle Grattan
17 August 2013

Kevin is not the only Rudd chasing votes in Queensland. Brother Greg today set out from Brisbane on a 10-day trip that will take him to Cairns and back, campaigning as an independent candidate for the Senate.

Before starting, he lodged his how-to-vote ticket — he's swapping preferences with Clive Palmer's PUP. He had previously ruled out deals with minor parties, but talks with the LNP came to nothing and Labor wasn't interested.

The political pitch of Greg, 59, one of Kevin's two older brothers, is the need to take day-to-day politics out of the “bedrock” issues facing Australia.

“When a parliamentary democracy is not working well, you stimulate it by putting more democracy into it,” he says. Like stimulating a flagging economy with more spending.

This should be done by a two-year-long parliamentary debate on core economic and other issues, including taxation, infrastructure, flexibility of the workforce, education, health and,

because it has become so difficult and divisive, policy on boat people.

After the two years a conscience vote of the whole parliament (House and Senate) should be held to lock in the “Bedrock Economic Policy” (BEP).

The BEP could only be amended every five years, after another conscience vote and two years of debate.

This would isolate some 25–30% of policy, leaving plenty to be handled in the traditional way, he says. But elections should be fought around which side would better manage the “core” program.

He instances tax policy as an issue that has suffered from being in the political maelstrom: “Over fifty years we’ve probably had ten major tax reviews”, most recently the Henry one. “But day-to-day politics makes it impossible to do anything serious.”

Greg Rudd’s campaign is also very Queensland. Indeed, this election seems all about Queensland, with Kevin desperately needing to win seats there and former state premier Peter Beattie flying back from the United States to try to secure one for Labor (though not going well, according to polling). In a campaign press release, Greg says that “unlike other senators, I will be able to fight for Queensland 100% of the time as I don’t have a party to tell me what to do. I only answer to Queensland.”

Greg worked for Con Sciacca, who was a Labor parliamentary secretary then a minister, from 1990 until Labor was defeated in 1996. Later he established a lobbying business, which he had to sell (for not much, to an employee) when his brother became prime minister in 2007. Greg says the sale was his decision, but Kevin had already declared he would be banned from lobbying federal ministers.

It was not the first time that being a Rudd had had financial fallout. There was 1996 when he was looking for a job in Queensland. Kevin had worked for the recently fallen Goss government and gained a reputation as a hatchet man. “I quickly

found out that with a name like Rudd I was unemployable”, so he turned to lobbying.

After he sold his business he moved to Beijing where he worked as a consultant, giving investment advice to Chinese businesses about Australia, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

Even in China, being Kevin’s brother was “difficult because of expectations”. The Chinese expected the prime minister’s brother to be in a privileged position; “I was offered many bribes”. On it becoming clear that Australia has a different system “they look at you after a while and say ‘What’s the use of you?’”

Greg returned to live in Australia after three years and spent 2011 based in Canberra, when he talked to many politicians about his political ideas. He moved back to Queensland last year to start his Senate campaign.

The relationship with Kevin is best described as distant (the two were never particularly close). Running into him at a business function in Brisbane about six weeks before the counter-coup, Greg told Kevin that the “presidential” or “messiah” brand of politics practised by him (and Barack Obama and earlier Tony Blair) didn’t work.

“You promise to do a lot — you were all about ending the blame game — but however well-intentioned, the structure doesn’t allow you to deliver,” Greg told him. “He listened and nodded for 15 minutes”, but had little to say.

Greg didn’t believe his brother should pursue a return to the leadership: “I didn’t think it would work out well for him — it was probably better to go down in history with the perception of being a person who had had the rug pulled out from him prematurely and unfairly.”

He can see both sides of the 2010 coup: “I know Kevin inside out and back the front. I can understand why they did it — and Kevin would have done exactly the same.” But “to me it was a two-way fault” — his colleagues should have stood up to him.

On his brother's testimony: "Kevin from a young guy has been consistent — he wants to do something good for Australia".

His advice to Kevin now, as Labor's campaign is struggling (Greg predicts an Abbott win, on a margin of 10–15 seats), is: "Focus on that, give us a journey, give concrete examples on a narrative pathway. Stop being so much a politician, and give the schools a miss."

Greg says he is not tribal, in a political sense. But ultimately, he is of the Rudd tribe and, despite the strains in their relationship, it appears blood is thicker than politics. "I wish him all the best," says Greg, who lives in Kevin's Brisbane seat of Griffith. "I'm voting for Kevin, as my brother. I'm not voting for Labor."

Day 14: The Coalition is not keen for a battle on health

Michelle Grattan
18 August 2013

As it enters the campaign's middle week desperately needing to make a big leap forward, Labor is shifting its focus to health and throwing everything into its negative pitch against Tony Abbott.

Trying to punch home the message that Abbott will be a huge threat to health and education programs, Kevin Rudd has no intention of being deterred by the fact-checkers' finding that the alleged A\$70 billion Coalition total funding hole is an exaggeration. The prime minister repeated the figure time and again today.

Health has a double advantage for Labor. It comes high in people's concerns (after the economy) when they are asked what will influence their vote. And Labor has a record of being historically regarded by voters as the better party to deal with it.

But there has been considerable convergence on health policy in recent years.

In 2007, Rudd campaigned hard on health and hospitals, promising a national takeover if he could not get states' cooperation for a reform plan. In government, he ran into great difficulty; in the process he became diverted by a national tour of hospitals in early 2010 that distracted him from other important issues. It was Julia Gillard who "landed" a hospitals agreement, albeit modified from the original plan.

Abbott, as health minister at one stage, favoured the Commonwealth taking over hospitals — his ambitions going way further than John Howard would countenance. But he has long ago backed off that.

Currently, there is bipartisan support for the present system of "activity" funding (where the Commonwealth pays its share of the growth in the cost for services on the basis of an "efficient price"), and on the devolution of more autonomy on hospitals to local communities.

On primary health care, there has been an argument, with the Coalition opposed to GP super clinics (for which the government provides capital costs) and saying it would re-examine Medicare Locals (which help coordinate a range of medical, hospital and ancillary health services).

A philosophic difference exists on private health insurance — the Coalition would like to abolish Labor's means test on the rebate. But lack of funds makes for common policy for the foreseeable future. The Coalition says any restoration would have to wait for the budget to be in better shape — and that won't be soon.

The Coalition's health policy will be out soon. But it does not want to make health a campaign issue (just like it didn't want education to be a battleground, hence its capitulation on Gonski). Spokesman Peter Dutton has been near invisible.

Rudd was out today with \$357 million for hospitals and health services around the country.

But his strongest message was negative, seeking to raise the spectre not just of deep cuts to health, but of the economy going backwards as well: “If Mr Abbott proceeds with his \$70 billion worth of cuts — and we can only assume he will — he runs a grave risk in 2014, if he is elected, of throwing this economy into recession.”

Addressing a rally today of health workers and ALP supporters, Rudd dwelt on the cuts Abbott made as health minister and what he would do if he became prime minister.

While the \$70 billion is an exaggeration, Abbott has some big spending, highlighted with the formal announcement of his generous paid parental leave scheme which, while not starting until July 1, 2015, will still cost a net extra \$6.1 billion over the forward estimates.

The opposition rests the scheme heavily on the argument that this is an economic measure. “Of the 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 33 offer paid parental leave schemes. Of these 33 countries, Australia is one of only two that fails to pay leave based on a replacement wage”, the policy document says.

“By offering only minimum wage, Australia is left economically behind its major OECD competitors. Due to this, we risk the productivity gains that come from greater participation by women in the paid workforce.... Paid parental leave is an economic driver and should be a workforce entitlement, not a welfare payment.”

The scheme has long been controversial within the Coalition, with both dries and some Nationals critical — the dries on philosophical grounds and the Nationals because few of their constituents will benefit.

But as Abbott says: “I am a convert. That is why I have a convert’s zeal on this.” Pity conversion carries such a big price tag.

Postscript: The friendship between Kevin Rudd and Bob Katter has yielded mutual dividends. Labor has given its prefer-

ences in the Senate to the Greens in all states except Queensland where they are going to Katter's KAP. The deal involved KAP preferencing Labor in several lower house seats.

Selecting between a right-leaning Senate candidate and a left-leaning one, Labor chose the former.

Rudd told reporters on Friday: "Bob, for reasons which many of you may find odd, has been a longstanding friend of mine." While no doubt calculations of self-interest were involved on both the ALP and KAP sides, it's a fair bet the Rudd-Katter closeness smoothed the way.

Day 15: Rudd struggles to turn negativity into a positive

Michelle Grattan

19 August 2013

It was not one of Kevin Rudd's easier days. Amid the pall cast by the poor newpoll, the prime minister was in Lismore campaigning with Janelle Saffin, MP for Page and one of Labor's more outspoken backbenchers, a critic on issues from live exports to coal seam gas.

Rudd was talking health but the local media were interested in Saffin.

She was a popular local member, a questioner said, but some of the things she was passionate about — increasing the dole, having asylum seekers processed onshore, stopping live exports — weren't reflected in Labor policies. Why should people be voting Labor?

Rudd launched into a character reference, paying Saffin an over-the-top compliment: she was so hard working "she makes me feel like a slouch.... She has a work ethic like I've never seen in my life."

Anyway, the ALP was “a broad church. We have internal discussions all the time.”

The serious interrogation of the day was on how Rudd had promised to be positive, but Labor’s advertising (and general) campaign is now relentlessly negative.

His answer to this charge is somewhat Jesuitical. He had said at the campaign’s start that every ad would be policy-based and those on air now “are policy-based” (based on Abbott’s policy and how it would be funded). The “spotlight” ad launched on Sunday put the attention on Abbott, who had been turning himself into a “tiny target” and not saying where the cuts would fall.

The ALP advertising has gone negative because Labor strategists have decided this is the best way of fighting back against the increasing Abbott momentum. With the material of the past six years, the Liberals are also focusing on negatives.

As former Labor heavyweight Graham Richardson said today: “Negative ads work.” Former Liberal staffer Grahame Morris agrees: “Negative advertising certainly works”; he adds the rider, however, that “its power is diminished if you spend three weeks saying you are not going to do it”.

But Andrew Hughes, lecturer in the Research School of Management at the Australian National University, is critical from a marketing perspective. He says it goes against the positive pitch in advertising generally, which people are used to.

“Politics is not different — politics is just another thing they consume in their lives,” Hughes told *The Conversation*.

Hughes says the Labor ads are not giving people a reason to change to Rudd. If he were advising the ALP he would build a campaign of positive advertising around key policy areas where Labor had advantages, using lots of visuals, people in marginal seats and few words: “I probably wouldn’t put Rudd in. He’s been slipping. His brand is becoming tired.”

Just when Rudd needs an absolutely united front in his campaign, a crack appeared today. His Northern Australia policy has caused trouble from the start and now has brought more.

Rudd last week outlined a personal “objective” of cutting the company rate in the NT by one-third. He said he had worked with the treasurer, Chris Bowen, finance minister Penny Wong, and the leadership group on the policy — which when released was widely criticised for being ill-thought through, to say nothing of inconsistent with Labor’s previous attacks on similar opposition ideas.

Pressed on Sky today to endorse the one-third fall, Wong shied around the hurdle more than once.

“What do you want the company tax rate to be?” Wong was asked. “Well I’m not going to be drawn on that. The prime minister has indicated what his preference is. We’ll go through the process that has been outlined.” That process includes consultations with the NT government and business, with a 2018 timetable for implementation.

The Wong incident is particularly notable because normally nothing can drive her off message.

Later she issued a further comment to *The Conversation*: “The Prime Minister’s objective is a worthy one and I support the Northern Australia policy.”

But the damage was done — and “worthy” didn’t equal endorsement.

On the other side, Abbott felt confident enough to taunt those who had criticised last week’s controversial observation that his Lindsay candidate Fiona Scott had “sex appeal”. Appearing with Scott today, Abbott followed her answer to a question with the comment: “At the risk of exciting anyone, can I just say, obviously from that answer, she ain’t just a pretty face, okay?” Of course it set off new debate, but it’s clear the Liberals believe (or know from their research) that people are taking a pretty relaxed view of his initial remark.

The day wasn’t entirely bad news for Rudd. Against a background of several recent discouraging polls, Essential had Labor on a primary vote of 40% and the two-party vote 50–50%.

This contrasted with Newspan's 34% primary and 46–54% two party result.

Hard heads on both sides won't be putting great store on the Essential showing. The bipartisan feeling is that the Coalition seems well placed at this stage. But any poll that bucks the trend contains some comfort for Labor, and politics can always take strange turns.

Meanwhile the leader issued the war cry: "Kevin Rudd is a fighter." Only the picky in Labor ranks would have found it slightly troubling that he was referring to himself in the third person.

Day 16: Candidate watch — another one overboard

Michelle Grattan

20 August 2013

Oops, another election candidate gone. That's three so far — two Labor, one Liberal. The latest casualty belonged to Tony Abbott and ran a site called "Mini-Mods", originally set up for Mini Cooper enthusiasts. It contained all sorts of unsavoury jokes and references, reportedly described as "tit banter".

It was clear from morning that Kevin Baker would be politically dead by nightfall.

Abbott initially said Baker "absolutely has done the wrong thing" and "to his credit he has pulled down the site, he has abjectly and I think quite properly apologised". But as soon as the opposition leader said he was getting a further briefing on the matter, the end of the story was written.

By late afternoon Baker announced his campaign was "over". He does, however, remain on the ballot paper, with a Liberal tag attached, because nominations have closed and ballot papers are printed.

But it's all right — there won't be another Pauline Hanson moment (she was disendorsed, but couldn't be taken off the ballot paper and was elected). Baker was (indeed still is) running for Charlton, a solid Labor seat. So by discarding him, the Liberals keep themselves nice without forfeiting any political chance.

It is a different tale with Ray King, Liberal candidate in McMahan, the seat where treasurer Chris Bowen could be vulnerable despite his 7.8% margin. King was called before the 1996 Wood royal commission on police corruption.

Abbott is sticking to him solidly: "Not only would I be comfortable to have him as an MP, I would be proud". King would be right behind the Coalition's "tough on gun crime policy" and, as a recently serving policeman, appalled at government cuts to Customs screening of cargoes.

"As for Ray King's appearance 20 odd years ago before a particular commission, hey come on! This is a government in Canberra that has ministers appearing before the Independent Commission against Corruption."

Labor won't let up on King, pointing out in a statement that he was investigated by the Internal Affairs branch of the NSW Police Force over his relationship with a number of "associates", and "is a close friend of disgraced former NSW detective Roger Rogerson, a man who served 12 months in prison after being convicted of lying to [the] NSW Police Integrity Commission". It also noted that Rogerson's sister is working on King's campaign.

Labor is challenging Abbott to ask the family of the late Billy McMahan, after whom the seat is named, to campaign for King.

The Liberals say King was never convicted of anything and had promotions after appearing before the commission.

Rogerson, who was jailed the first time for perverting the course of justice, has given his backing to King, telling Fairfax Media: "He's a decent, hardworking fellow who will serve the people of McMahan very well. I don't know him well but he would make a better politician than some of these union blokes the Labor Party gets in."

An endorsement, one would think, that King would be better without.

Another Liberal candidate came embarrassingly into the spotlight this week — for ignorance rather than matters of conduct, character, or associates. Tom Zorich, standing in the South Australian Labor seat of Wakefield, was asked during a debate with Labor incumbent Nick Champion about how the opposition's direct action policy worked.

"I'm not across all those issues," he confessed. "As a candidate and a businessman I'm not across everything ... I haven't got much to tell you about that.

"Being a candidate I'm here to offer myself as a person that represents this area and this electorate. I'm in a different sphere to where Nick Champion is and I will say to you now I don't have [knowledge] ... across all the issues ... and I'll leave it at that."

There was some sympathy for Zorich, on the grounds that candidates can't be expected to have the grasp of detail that MPs do. But this is not really much of an excuse. First, the direct action policy is a very central one for the Coalition. Second, what about briefings and homework? A party should do the former; the candidates the latter. And what happened to the idea of putting up mustard-sharp youngsters in unwinnable seats as training for contesting winnable ones in the future? They would at least learn their stuff.

Kevin Rudd this morning was delighted to seize on Abbott's problems with Baker and King: "It's time for Mr Abbott to show a bit of leadership and a bit of guts. Man up," said the prime minister.

He was, of course, echoing what Abbott from time to time tells him to do on various issues. There is a good deal of verbal virility in this campaign.

On another front, Rudd's feisty daughter Jessica did some manning up (or whatever the female equivalent is) — she took on Rupert Murdoch.

In a direct (as opposed to through his newspapers) campaign intervention, Murdoch tweeted: “Conviction politicians hard to find anywhere. Australia’s Tony Abbott rare exception. Opponent Rudd all over the place convincing nobody.”

To which Jess Rudd tweeted: “Thanks for taking the time each day to tell us what to think.”

Rudd claimed not to have seen the Murdoch text but “Jess will say what she wants”.

Like father, like daughter, when it comes to responding to the media baron.

Postscript: Both sides will woo Queensland voters by having their campaign launches in Brisbane. The Liberals will launch this Sunday; Labor will launch the following Sunday.

Day 17: Labor joins the dots between Coalition PPL and threat to retirees’ money

Michelle Grattan

21 August 2013

The challenge for the government is this: how does it turn Tony Abbott’s highly generous and potentially popular paid parental scheme into a negative for the Coalition without knocking motherhood?

Labor’s answer, in part, is to portray the plan for mums as a threat to the grandparents’ nest eggs.

“It is going to hit superannuation big time,” Kevin Rudd declared today.

The argument runs like this. The plan, costing a gross A\$5.5 billion annually, is part funded by a 1.5% levy on about 3000 big companies, which would be offset by the Coalition’s promise of a 1.5% reduction in the company tax rate. The levy does not attract

franking credits (offsets to prevent double taxation of dividends) which means some penalty for shareholders, including super funds. It has been estimated this amounts to about \$1.7 billion annually, which would help pay for the scheme.

This enables Labor to join the dots between the PPL scheme and retirees, which it has been doing all day.

Apart from Rudd, treasurer Chris Bowen and finance minister Penny Wong were pumping the line out.

“The decision by the Liberal Party not to provide franking credits for the levy paid by Australia’s businesses ... means that the levy will be paid by every single shareholder in Australia,” Bowen said.

“In these days of modern superannuation every single worker is a shareholder through their superannuation scheme.... This is Tony Abbott’s giant raid on Australia’s investors.”

Not only is the scheme a big hit on investors, Labor claims, but it breaks an Abbott promise. The opposition made much of its policy “that there will be no adverse unexpected changes to people’s superannuation under a Liberal government”, the treasurer said. “Guess what? This is adverse and it is unexpected.”

The line that the PPL scheme is an attack on superannuation fits in with Labor’s general theme that Abbott would “cut, cut, cut”.

On Twitter Malcolm Fraser chimed into the debate: “Investors take \$1.7bn hit for parental leave. Bad for retired people especially, inconceivably bad policy.”

The PPL plan, Abbott’s signature policy in this election and a highlight from his last one too, is a remarkably friendless initiative.

Big business doesn’t like it, for obvious reasons. Liberal dries and rightwing groups such as the Institute of Public Affairs are critics. So are some in the Nationals, who believe their constituents wouldn’t much benefit.

On the other hand, in a case of strange bedfellows, the Greens were quite attracted to the scheme, although they believe it too generous.

Labor research is showing the PPL plan is vulnerable on the ground of unfairness. At the maximum, it would give someone who's been earning \$150,000 annual income \$75,000 for six months parental leave. The research is also finding people talking about the potential for rorting.

Abbott has invited and made easier the Labor attack by not releasing detailed costings for the plan. The Coalition can't even justify this by the argument it uses for not putting out its total costings — that it needs to wait until it releases all its policies. There is no reason why the costings for this policy could not be issued at once. They should have come out with the scheme, on Sunday.

Manager of opposition business Christopher Pyne said today: “We’re releasing [costings] as we release spending announcements”, which has not been the case with PPL.

On the general question of costings, Saul Eslake of Bank of America Merrill Lynch estimates today that the Coalition has so far promised revenue measures costing about \$28.5 billion over four years to 2016–17, and new spending of about \$14.75 billion. But it has so far announced savings only of almost \$13.5 billion.

Eslake says this means it needs to find another \$30 billion “credibly to claim that it will produce a ‘bottom line’ no worse than that most recently forecast by the government”.

Abbott said today the PPL plan would be funded from three sources: the levy, discontinuing Labor’s scheme, and “consequential adjustments, such as ending double dipping for public servants”.

“It’s fully costed and it’s fully funded,” he said — which leaves no legitimate excuse for not telling us the breakdown ASAP.

Abbott and Hockey brushed off the Labor attacks, with Abbott saying that levies never attract franking credits (but what other levies have there been on company tax?).

Hockey said the argument about franking had been around since 2010. Shareholders would be better off under the Coalition

because it would reduce the overall tax burden, and self-funded retirees “will always and have always been better off under the Coalition than under Labor”.

The battle over PPL is a major test of a scare campaign, of which we have seen many over the years, most notably and successfully against Abbott’s old boss John Hewson’s Fightback! in 1993.

We can assume there will be a lot of Liberal focus group testing to judge whether the attack is having an impact on support for this policy, which for Abbott has become so much part of the political persona he wants to project.

Day 18: Abbott reaches the right place on tobacco donations, for expedient reasons

Michelle Grattan
22 August 2013

Occasionally, something spontaneously good happens in a campaign. That was the case today when Tony Abbott, under strong political pressure, announced he had told the Liberal Party not to accept any more donations from tobacco companies.

The worth of this modest advance is not diminished by its arising out of a blend of expediency and cynicism.

It came about after Kevin Rudd tried to embarrass Abbott by pledging legislation to ban all parties accepting tobacco money. He could speak from the high moral ground because the ALP (admirably) stopped taking tobacco dollars in 2004. Since then the Coalition has received A\$2 million in donations.

Talking to Fairfax Media, Rudd also said he would move to stop public sector superannuation funds investing in these companies. The Future Fund has already eschewed them.

Abbott hasn't matched the latter undertaking. But he swiftly moved on the donations front.

It wasn't with good grace, however (and the really cynical might say the opposition has probably already banked any such donations for this election). Abbott said he didn't want Rudd to be able to run a distraction: "I don't want furphys like this to distract people from the major issues of the campaign."

And he challenged the prime minister to give back funding from a foundation with tobacco industry links that he received as a backbencher to attend a conference in Germany (Rudd has said he didn't know of the link).

Asked whether he would return tobacco money already taken by his campaign Abbott quickly said: "No.... I will gladly ask the Liberal Party to refund the money from tobacco companies when Mr Rudd refunds the Health Services Union subventions to the Labor Party."

The pressure on Abbott over tobacco donations began much earlier. Even before the election starter gun, Labor had an advertisement featuring clips of him defending them.

When Rudd and his Liberal opponent in Griffith, eye specialist and former Australian Medical Association president Bill Glasson, took part in a candidates' debate at the start of the campaign, donations and other smoking-related issues came up.

Glasson supported the recent excise increase (while putting in a line that the government had only done it for the money) and said if he were in the Coalition party room he would lobby against accepting tobacco donations.

Rudd chipped in: "So is Bill now calling on Tony Abbott today to stop taking money from tobacco companies? It's the here and now that counts." The debate moved on without the question being answered.

Abbott was asked soon after about Glasson's remark. His first response was to have a go at Rudd over the German trip.

He went on: "Donors to the Liberal Party don't buy us, they don't buy our policy. When I was the health minister I put

graphic warnings all over cigarette packets and as a result, in part, of the policies that I pursued as health minister, smoking rates in this country fell significantly.”

The Labor government has a good record in taking action against smoking. Even if its two big excise hikes were prompted by budget needs, they discourage people taking up a habit that will only do them harm.

Its plain packaging legislation was not financially driven and brought it hassles, including a High Court challenge, which it successfully defended.

The opposition eventually supported the packaging legislation and is set to absorb the excise hike into its own costings (because it too needs the money).

But in doing things with poor grace, Abbott does himself a disservice — because he is well across the facts from his ministerial days and has a personal commitment to fitness.

This day, after the second debate, had a generally low key feel about it. Abbott’s health policy was “me too-ish”; Labor launched initiatives for small business.

But after getting some praise over his performance in Wednesday’s encounter, there have been a couple of sour notes for Rudd. The debate’s make-up woman said on Facebook that Abbott had been lovely and engaged in genuine conversation with her; in contrast, she had never “had anyone treat me so badly [as Rudd had] whilst trying to do my job”.

Rudd said he had been “in the zone” before going on stage; anyway, “I’m not happy getting make-up put on at the best of days”. Without knowing precisely what happened one shouldn’t rush to judgement, but the bottom line is the story was everywhere and reinforces negative impressions about how he behaves in private.

Then there is the home front. Just when Rudd was being criticised for withdrawing from a debate with Glasson tonight, out comes a *Guardian* Longergan poll that puts Glasson ahead of him in Griffith 52–48%.

There is a big poll margin of error; the seat is on 8.5%, and nobody would put money on the Liberals there. But with the tobacco announcement, the Rudd no-show and the poll, it was an all-round satisfying day for the Doc.

Day 19: PPL — it goes back to the “baby drought”

Michelle Grattan
23 August 2013

Tony Abbott describes himself as a “convert” to paid parental leave. Once a declared sceptic, he’s not only a believer but a passionate advocate of a scheme that has become highly controversial and divisive in this campaign. So how was he persuaded to a faith now so strong that even colleagues roll their eyes?

“What slowly changed my mind was the experience of female colleagues who often felt torn between the demands of parliamentary life and the duties of motherhood,” he wrote in *Battlelines* in 2009.

Enter Jackie Kelly, former Liberal member for the western Sydney seat of Lindsay. (Abbott recently famously said that she and present candidate Fiona Scott both had sex appeal. It brought him criticism but didn’t do Scott any harm — she appears set to win the seat.)

Kelly, an MP from 1996 to 2007 and good mates with Abbott, had two babies while in parliament, the first when she was minister for sport and tourism (she was the first to give birth while a serving federal minister).

Her situation was unusual: she didn’t get maternity leave but her pay wasn’t docked when she took time off. In contrast, she says, the check-out woman at the supermarket didn’t receive pay. “How was that fair?”

Kelly was in Abbott's ear, especially when they rode on his "Pollie Pedal". "We'd get talking about life. I didn't miss an opportunity," she tells *The Conversation*, adding quickly, "but I wasn't a nag."

For his part, Abbott was concerned about why women were having fewer children. Kelly would argue to him: "You say you want people to have more children — but you're not putting anything out there." She harked back to the Liberal Party's commitment to family values to push the case.

As they pedalled their way around various places, Kelly would ask women at the meetings for their views. Abbott could hear "example after example of how policy was letting us down".

Kelly says he was on board well before she left parliament: "I used my time very, very well on the pollie pedal."

Abbott these days sells PPL as a driver of productivity as well as increased population. Kelly's comments and *Battlelines* make clear that boosting fertility has always been an important goal. "Anything that makes having children easier is likely to mean more of them," he wrote (as well as talking about fairness). "A paid maternity leave scheme could motivate some career women to choose to have a child and others to choose to have two children rather than just one." One subheading in the book is entitled "The Child Drought".

Abbott frequently acknowledges that generous PPL is hard for some conservatives to accept, because they fear it will encourage women to forsake what he refers to in *Battlelines* as their "traditional roles". But the "child drought" concept can square the circle.

"As Jackie Kelly has most persistently argued, more support was needed if women were both to stay in the workforce and continue to have children. The parliamentary child care centre, for instance, which she did so much to bring about, was absolutely necessary if conservative, motherhood-minded women were to enter parliament before their children had grown up," he wrote.

Abbott announced the plan to the party room in 2010 as a captain's pick, and took it to the 2010 election.

He and the Coalition argue its benefits for women up and down the income scale. But by linking the payment to income — providing up to a maximum of A\$75,000 for six months plus superannuation — it is obvious that it has women up the scale particularly in mind.

Abbott said in May: “We do not educate women to higher degree level to deny them a career. If we want women of that calibre to have families, and we should, well we have to give them a fair dinkum chance to do so. That is what this scheme of paid parental leave is all about.”

To that extent it can be seen as involving some social engineering. But politically the “women of calibre” pitch has obvious problems, and it's not one we hear now from Abbott.

One of his central points is that PPL should be seen as not welfare but a workplace entitlement and so should be tied to wages. It's a measure to keep women with skills attached to the workforce.

In adopting PPL so enthusiastically, Abbott has deserted the position held by John Howard, who makes clear in his autobiography *Lazarus Rising* his opposition to the Abbott plan. Howard criticises the Labor government scheme as discriminating against stay-at-home parents, adding: “The policy announced by Tony Abbott was more generous and, as a consequence, discriminates even more heavily against stay-at-home parents.”

Some see the Abbott PPL as a carefully crafted attempt to neutralise his so-called women's problem. That has become a consideration. But the hitch with that theory to explain how he initially came to his view is that *Battlelines* was written before there seemed any real likelihood he would become leader.

After the conversion, why the Abbott zealotry? One reason is that all leaders like and need a big idea. Howard's was industrial relations reform. For Abbott it's become a blow-you-away PPL plan.

Day 20: Queensland becomes Labor's state of anxiety

Michelle Grattan
24 August 2013

Forde is a litmus test for Labor. In the state where Kevin Rudd desperately needs to win seats from the Coalition, the ALP has thrown everything at this one, recruiting former premier Peter Beattie to try to work some electoral magic.

Yet, with just two weeks to go, Beattie admits: "If you're a betting man, you probably wouldn't put money on me." This is despite the Liberal National Party (LNP) holding Forde by a very modest 1.6% margin.

But having survived some tough spots, he adds: "It's not over yet. I'm a fighter — I've been in worse political positions before ... and we've won."

Queensland generally has turned from Labor's hope of salvation to a state of anxiety. When a poll the other day showed Rudd trailing his LNP opponent Bill Glasson 48–52% in his solid ALP seat of Griffith, people thought it was a "rogue" result. With Newspoll in *The Australian* since showing the same two-party result, it's another matter.

Newspoll's survey of the eight most marginal Queensland Coalition seats, done Monday to Wednesday, had the Coalition ahead 60–40% in two-party terms, and Labor's primary vote at 32%, compared to 36.5% at the 2010 election.

Beattie, hat shielding his fair complexion from the already warm Queensland sun, started today's campaigning outside Logan Hospital, just over the border of the neighbouring electorate of Rankin. There, Wayne Swan's former chief of staff Jim Chalmers is running for ex-minister Craig Emerson's old seat.

The Chalmers team is a little mystified by some of the recent Queensland polling, reporting that the feeling they have been getting on the ground is more positive.

Beattie moves onto the Eagleby Festival, where the sitting LNP member for Forde, Bert van Manen, is also pressing the flesh.

Ever the shrewd politician, Beattie finds out that he is allowed to speak. But he doesn't make a "speech". He just stands up and says that he knows people there are sick of politics, wishes them a great day, and quips "the good news is I'm not going to sing". He says just enough to make his presence felt.

Van Manen today has the support of Liberal frontbencher Greg Hunt. They greet each other with a huge bear hug: the campaign trail can bring out a special camaraderie among those bound together in the quest for victory or survival.

During his three years in federal parliament, van Manen, 48, who formerly ran a financial advisory business, has remained totally locally focused, which may stand him in good stead this election: "We've just been focused on our community plans."

He tells *The Conversation* that the structure of his campaign was set six months ago and has altered little because of his surprise new opponent: "Election campaigns can always throw you a curve ball; this was one out of left field."

A former Labor member for Forde, Mary Crawford, recently wrote in *The Conversation* that the seat would not be "an easy run for Beattie". She described van Manen as "a very personable local man, whose social conservatism will no doubt appeal to many constituents".

Forde spans an area between Logan, south of Brisbane, and the top of the Gold Coast. Its population is multicultural; the median weekly household income is A\$1,301 and the median mortgage repayment is \$1,950 a month, both around the national median.

Beattie says Forde is "tough — we're behind". A Newspan poll done on Monday and Tuesday saw Beattie trailing 46–54% on a

two-party basis and Labor's primary vote on 38%. It is understood that Labor polling is in line with the two-party result, although the ALP primary vote was a little higher.

Beattie has said if Labor can't win Forde, it can't hold government.

After announcing Beattie's candidature with much fanfare less than three weeks ago, Rudd hasn't been back to the seat.

"He expects me to be big enough, and ugly enough to look after myself," Beattie tells *The Conversation*, over a decaf coffee in a McDonald's cafe between stops. "I'm not a freshman when it comes to campaigning.... Once you've ridden a bike, you know how to ride it."

The ride is, however, not always totally comfortable.

It's awkward when he is asked his opinion on things Anna Bligh did in government. Beattie handed over to Bligh, is fond of her, and doesn't want to bag her decisions. But he has to be honest, he says. No doubt that's politically savvy as well. The Bligh government got an almighty thumping at last year's state election.

Beattie's made it clear that he didn't think the Bligh government should have accepted the recommendation for higher electricity prices. Both Bligh and LNP Premier Campbell Newman "should have had the guts to say no", when recommendations were made.

Beattie as state leader was one of the best retail politicians in the game. But in Forde, some voters are distinguishing between the man and the product. A local cafe owner has been impressed by Beattie's several visits for coffee; van Manen had been expected, but has not yet shown up. But the small businessman says Labor still won't get his vote.

Day 21: Abbott brings in the girls to give him a character reference

Michelle Grattan
25 August 2013

Increasingly confident of victory, but with fingers tightly crossed against any last minute hitches, Tony Abbott projected a cautious and touch humble persona at today's campaign launch.

The opposition leader kept his immediate promises modest, but was much bolder when he was talking a decade on.

In the short term, there is a carrot for self-funded retirees — increasing the eligibility thresholds for the seniors health card.

These people are a core constituency for the Coalition. But the message coming back is that some have been unsettled by the lack of franking on the planned paid parental scheme levy on business, which has consequences for dividends and super. Labor is capitalising on one of the few advantages the campaign has thrown up for it, targeting retirees in tough advertising.

Another small initiative, a loan scheme for apprentices, was pitched at the “Abbott battlers”, especially in western Sydney, where Labor is struggling and Kevin Rudd found the going difficult during his visit late last week.

The launch, with warm-ups from Queensland premier Campbell Newman, deputy Liberal leader Julie Bishop and Nationals leader Warren Truss, reflected all the focus group messages. Kevin Rudd is a “fake”. The election is all about “trust” — the trust deficit is apparently much bigger even than the fiscal deficit. People want “reassuring”.

The Coalition has neatly turned Rudd's “new way” back on him, using it to its own advantage. Rudd doesn't talk about a “new way” so much these days, but Abbott cuts through with the logic that the only real “new way” is to get a new government.

“Choose change and there are few problems that cannot be improved,” he said.

Talking about the long term, Abbott didn’t hold back. He declared that within a decade, the budget surplus would be 1% of GDP, defence spending 2% of GDP, the private health insurance insurance rebate would be fully restored (that is, the means test scrapped), and each year government would be a smaller percentage of the economy.

Would such ambitions be achievable? Who knows. Presumably if they became dodgy they would be reined back or scrapped later. But anyway, a Coalition government might not be around as long as that. The Labor government, if it is defeated, will have only lasted six years.

Abbott’s emphasis is on keeping promises in the first term, as well as convincing people he would hit the ground running. The first day of a Coalition government was looking a bit frenetic: he’d be instructing the public service to prepare the carbon tax repeal legislation and giving directions for “Operation Sovereign Borders”, as well as a few other things happening. Then there is an agenda for the first hundred days.

Abbott is unhesitating about his plans but desperate to avoid projecting a sense of entitlement. “Give my team a chance,” he appeals. He promises: “I won’t let you down.”

The launch’s look and tone was traditional and low-key. Without razzmatazz. When Abbott finished speaking, there was no exuberant, arms-aloft rallying gesture — instead, a half wave to the crowd.

The out-of-the-box surprise was having daughters Frances and Bridget introduce him with folksy, anecdotal speeches, designed to make Dad look human, strong, reliable (and of course woman-friendly).

“For us, he’s not just the guy on TV, he’s the man, along with our Mum, who has helped us become the women we are today,” Frances said. She told a story about her “netball Dad”, a ferocious barracker from the sidelines. The tale had a political

message: “For a man who has never put on a netball skirt, Dad was always giving us netball advice — it was only a few years later when I realised that the advice he gave was more about life than just the sport. He said, ‘You must give it everything you’ve got, play as a team, watch out for each other, look ahead, stay focused, enjoy yourself, always get back up and don’t forget to shake hands.’”

Bridget rammed home the positives: Dad treated everyone with respect; was a listener; a learner; not judgemental; didn’t think he was smarter than you were. “That’s the type of Dad he is for us and if elected, I know that’s the type of prime minister he will be for Australia.”

For both Kevin Rudd and Abbott, their families are crucial and these families in turn are putting shoulders to the wheel for their fathers’ campaigns.

Abbott has been lucky. Rudd, lauded and returned to the leadership for his campaigning skills, has not proved to be the great campaigner his supporters had hoped.

Things again went awry this weekend, when the prime minister switched attention to foreign affairs and the crisis in Syria. It was perfectly reasonable to call the Saturday meeting of senior ministers to receive a briefing on the Syrian events — Australia is about to assume the chair at the United Nations Security Council. But after this was reported (wrongly) as Rudd suspending his campaign to deal with the Syrian issue, and he fulfilled an engagement to film the ABC’s *Kitchen Cabinet*, his critics were able to have a field day. Rudd should have been clear about what he was doing.

Appearing on the ABC’s *Insiders* this morning, Rudd was heavily on the defensive. His admission that Labor had not had a mandate for the carbon tax was another golden moment for the opposition.

In Labor circles, some are talking about how Paul Keating managed to turn around the 1993 election and grab victory in the “unwinnable election”.

Rudd said when he went into this election that he was the underdog, although to many observers he appeared to have a better prospect of victory than Keating did at the beginning of the 1993 campaign. But most things that have happened since have much diminished the chance of doing a Keating.

Day 22: The Nationals like their trains — whoever is promoting them

Michelle Grattan
26 August 2013

After Kevin Rudd reached today for a vintage big idea — the fast train — in his quest for voter bait, he quickly received a large tick from Tim Fischer, former deputy prime minister and Nationals leader.

Fischer, out of politics for years but with his finger still on the pulse, is a train buff from way back. He's author of *Trains Unlimited in the 21st Century*, and a member of the High Speed Rail Advisory Group, whose report Rudd released with his promise of legislation to preserve a 1748-kilometre land corridor and A\$52 million to set up an authority for the project. It is to finalise track alignment and station locations, work with Infrastructure Australia to develop a business case, and refine cost estimates as well as identify opportunities for private sector involvement.

The fast train is like a mirage; it has been endlessly talked about but always recedes into the distance. The cost would be huge — some \$114 billion.

But for Rudd, the attraction is obvious. It's ambitious; it touches many electorates; it appeals to regional Australia. And in cash strapped times, today's incremental promise is a steal at only \$52 million.

The advisory group worked fast, knowing the caretaker period was bearing down. The report has proved a good fit with the government's political imperatives.

Fischer points to other imperatives: "They needed to act urgently because of developments along Donnybrook Road [in Melbourne] just north east of Tullamarine. There is an urgent danger that subdivisions will stuff the entry of the rail north of Tullamarine" on its way to the centre of the city.

Attention turned to the opposition after the Rudd announcement. Tony Abbott says he wants to be a "infrastructure prime minister". But today he dismissed the Labor initiative: "I'd much rather spend money now to get better outcomes tomorrow, rather than in 40 years' time," he said, listing various road projects the opposition was backing.

But Fischer said he was confident that Liberal Sharman Stone (Murray), National Michael McCormack (Riverina), Liberal John Alexander (Bennelong) and National Luke Hartsuyker (Cowper), whose electorates the rail would pass through (or perhaps near, in the case of Bennelong) "will see the huge decentralisation benefits and will ensure the Coalition agrees to the corridor preservation, which is all you can do at this stage".

Indeed, Nationals leader Warren Truss was already in the cart. "The Coalition will begin the work to preserve the corridor and establish an authority to manage the project," he said. In reply to whether that meant the Coalition would match Labor's \$52 million commitment, he said it would "provide the resources necessary to undertake these tasks".

McCormack said: "I could hardly criticise [Labor's announcement] — it's something I've been advocating and lobbying for." He said he was concerned about the project's cost and the way Labor would pay for it. "At least it does show long-term vision — something politics needs. It would open regional areas and boost development."

Rudd pulled out the train initiative not just to sell himself as a nation builder, but to draw an enormously long bow in his assault on Abbott's paid parental scheme.

"If we were to build this entire 1750-kilometre high speed rail project from Brisbane to Melbourne by 2035, it would cost less than Mr Abbott's unaffordable, unfair, paid parental leave scheme for the same period of time.

"What is more necessary for the nation's future? A high speed rail network which links these vital cities along Australia's east coast or an unaffordable, unfair paid parental leave scheme?"

Well, there's a question!

It seems clear that Abbott's PPL scheme has become lead in the saddle for the opposition. The latest Essential poll released today (which has Labor and opposition on 50–50 two-party vote, better for the ALP than Newspoll's 47–53%) found 35% supported the government's current PPL scheme, and only 24% preferred the Abbott plan; 28% liked neither.

(The poll suggests one reason why Labor has not has more success with its accusation the opposition will "cut, cut, cut". People expect that whichever side is elected will cut: 61% thought it unlikely a Liberal government would be able to pay for its commitments without more cuts after the election, while 59% said the same about Labor.)

The Abbott PPL is particularly vulnerable because it has so many enemies within the Coalition, among the Nationals and "dry" Liberals.

Rudd jumped on answers by Malcolm Turnbull today to declare the Liberal Party "split down the middle" over the policy.

When pushed in an interview, Turnbull said "it really is a choice and when people say it's too much or it's too generous it's a reasonable objection...."

"But it's our policy, it's a signature policy of Tony Abbott and it's not just his idea. We are all committed to it.... If people want to have a meaner and less generous paid parental leave, well that's what the Labor party's offering".

Turnbull didn't deviate from the policy but he did acknowledge the critics in a rather convincing manner.

Abbott is keeping the team glued together but every now and then some cracks show.

Day 23: Rudd woos Queensland and cops it from NSW

Michelle Grattan
27 August 2013

This election might be all about Queensland, but Kevin Rudd's naval courting of the north smelt of electoral desperation and is backfiring on him.

The prime minister today held out the prospect of moving some of the fleet to Brisbane as part of relocating vessels from Garden Island to the north and west of the country.

Rudd's plan to possibly scale back or replace the Garden Island base was blatantly more politically than policy driven. He unveiled it at the Lowy Institute in Sydney then rushed to the Port of Brisbane to spruik it.

It was the second Rudd "big idea" in two days. First the train. Now the ships. His proposal earlier in the campaign to slash company tax for the Northern Territory makes a trifecta.

In each case nothing much would be done any time soon. The NT tax break is stamped 2018. Don't wait on a station for the very fast train or, if you're a middle-aged sailor, to be relocated from Garden Island.

We're talking about a taskforce (with military top brass and the Defence department head) that would advise on "the timing, proportion and implementation of moving some or all of fleet Base East to Queensland and Perth and developing, upgrading or expanding Darwin and Broome".

It wouldn't even report for two years, and the government "would expect the relocation of fleet elements north and west to be completed by 2030".

Rudd argued that strategically, it would be desirable to relocate vessels closer to the action (including for natural disaster work in the Pacific) and economically it would be win, win. Garden Island would be opened up "for the possibility of exciting new uses" — more green spaces, heritage protection, more berths for cruise ships. Meanwhile, Brisbane and other ports would get jobs from the naval developments. (Remember Rudd has said he will campaign on jobs every day of this last fortnight.)

But the naval initiative is under assault on various fronts.

Potential losers — at the NSW end — are always noisier than those who might gain. But also, Rudd is defying some expert opinion, and the economics of tough times, and that leaves his political motives more exposed.

He said the proposal would be paid for without drawing on the Defence budget — a proposition only possible when you are talking about so many years further on that the detail doesn't matter.

Rudd has bought an unhelpful row with NSW premier Barry O'Farrell. "A phone call would have been helpful," an angry O'Farrell snapped at the prime minister when they ran into each other during the news conference round.

When he got to Brisbane Rudd then unloaded on O'Farrell, calling him a "grumpy premier", and accusing him of "huffing and puffing and storming down the boardwalk ... He should spend more time in his office and out in the suburbs of western Sydney" starting real construction work.

Rudd himself seems to be giving Sydney a lower political priority than "Brissie" because his proposal allows O'Farrell to make the obvious "jobs" argument, claiming 4,000 families would be hit.

Rudd's unleashing on O'Farrell, even after provocation, isn't smart tactics. O'Farrell will naturally put his state first (and that's even apart from the politics). He did this when he was the first premier to sign up to Gonski (to Tony Abbott's annoyance).

Rudd has based his case on the 2012 Defence Force Posture Review which said: "Defence should commence planning now on long-term options for establishing a supplementary east coast fleet base at Brisbane for the future submarine and large amphibious ships."

It also recommended that: "Defence should develop options to allow large amphibious ships to embark army units based in Brisbane and (as a lesser priority) in Adelaide, in addition to Townsville and Darwin."

But the prime minister has chosen to repudiate this year's Defence White Paper, released only in May, which gave reasons for the government deciding not to proceed with the Brisbane proposal.

"The significant preliminary cost estimate (in the order of A\$6 billion), challenges associated with land acquisition, environmental considerations, the need for extensive dredging and the wider dispersion to a third fleet base of Royal Australian Navy personnel and training, all suggest that establishing a fleet base in Brisbane would be challenging and require significant continued investment for it to remain sustainable."

That seems a fairly comprehensive and reasonable case against the "Brissie" move.

The Rudd initiative has won support from former Defence secretary Allan Hawke, who said it would be good for recruiting and retention. But Neil James from the Australia Defence Association attacked it, saying it was just political.

Andrew Davies, from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a former defence official and an expert on ADF capability, says there is no compelling strategic reason for relocating the bulk of the fleet away from Garden Island and big cost arguments

against, although there is a case for using Brisbane for the “overflow” of the big amphibious vessels.

Rudd declared: “This is a good day in terms of making the big calls on the future of our defence infrastructure bases”. As for his political call ... perhaps not so much.

Day 24: Rudd seeks to play middle power diplomacy

Michelle Grattan

28 August 2013

Kevin Rudd is living two lives. He is fighting, and on all the evidence losing, an election campaign. Between times, he is also keeping himself very busy on the international stage.

What an irony. Thanks primarily to Rudd’s efforts, Australia currently has a temporary seat on the United Nations Security Council. And just when the Syrian issue is reaching boiling point, on Sunday Australia takes over the council presidency.

Yet it is more than likely that by the week after next, it will be Tony Abbott who will be calling the shots on Australia’s foreign policy.

Rudd would have loved nothing more than to be sitting in that Security Council chair next week or soon after. And it was extremely hard for him to decide to miss the G20 in St Petersburg next week.

When he was first musing on election dates, he mentioned the G20 as a consideration. But his advisers won the day and the G20 had to be sacrificed. Foreign minister Bob Carr will represent Australia. (Why doesn’t Rudd address the meeting via telephone?)

Meanwhile, Rudd is trying to play middle-power diplomacy to the hilt.

Among those with whom he has discussed Syria are US president Barack Obama, British prime minister David Cameron, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, French president Francois Hollande, New Zealand prime minister John Key, and Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Obama rang Rudd. Australia initiated the discussions with Cameron, Ban, Hollande and Yudhoyono.

“We are working with our friends and allies across the world at this time of growing crisis in the Middle East, and in Syria in particular,” the prime minister said today.

Rudd is all for robust action: “What we have witnessed is tantamount to a crime against humanity when you see the use of chemical weapons against civilians.

“The Australian government, after conversations with our allies has formed a view that there is overwhelming evidence that chemical weapons have been used [and] we have high confidence that the regime in Syria is responsible for these attacks.”

Attention therefore turned to the next step, he said. Rudd has made it clear he thinks the international community can’t just stand aside and “wave through” such behaviour.

Russia and China stand in the way of Security Council backing for military intervention. Asked about action without UN backing, Carr said the United States, United Kingdom and possibly France had indicated “that in the extremity of this circumstance they’re prepared to consider a response independent of the United Nations, which at a Security Council level remains divided”.

It was “yet to be seen” whether Australia would endorse that, Carr said.

It’s hard to see how Rudd wouldn’t do so, given all he has said. It is equally difficult to believe Tony Abbott would not give a tick to whatever the United States did.

If such action came in the caretaker period, which appears likely, there are different opinions on whether the government should consult the opposition on an Australian response.

Australia would not be asked to provide any assets, so the application of the convention would be marginal. Consultation or not, Rudd and Abbott would likely be walking hand in hand.

But Rudd has also sought to use the Syrian crisis for domestic politics, saying on Tuesday he doubted Abbott had the “temperament” to handle such situations. Abbott had “an impulsive nature ... rushing ahead to a judgement” when “you have to sit back, think, calmly reflect and then work through what you think the best decision is”.

Asked today what experience he would draw on if Obama asked for Australian assistance, Abbott harked back to his cabinet days: “Matters of war and peace, of life and death, were before the Howard cabinet on a number of occasions and obviously as a member of that cabinet, I was part of the deliberations that John Howard and Alexander Downer and others led.”

The Rudd line about Abbott’s unsuitability for international diplomacy was another version of what Paul Keating tried against Howard in the 1996 campaign when he suggested regional leaders would not want to deal with Howard.

But questioning Abbott’s temperament is risky for Rudd — the comeback is so easy. “I will leave it to my colleagues to testify to what they think of my temperament and judgement and character,” Abbott said. “I will leave it to Mr Rudd’s colleagues to testify as to what they think of his judgment and temperament and character.”

Carr continued the attack today, saying Australians would be more comfortable with the internationalism, experience, and familiarity with world leaders that Kevin Rudd offered, “as opposed to the adventurism of Tony Abbott”.

Asked what this “adventurism” would mean, Carr said: “I don’t know, you’d have to press Tony Abbott about that” — a bit rich when it was Carr making the “adventurism” charge.

While Rudd was thinking politically when he slighted Abbott, no doubt it would be his personal belief too. The

prospect of Abbott hosting the next G20, to be held in Brisbane, would be for Rudd one of the most galling aspects of an election defeat.

Keating's 1996 attack on Howard's foreign policy credentials didn't influence voters and it's unlikely they'll be listening to Rudd's criticisms of Abbott's suitability either. Australia might have a (peripheral) role during the Syrian international crisis, but this election is being determined on strictly domestic issues.

Day 25: Public servants say "No, Minister"

Michelle Grattan

29 August 2013

Amid an election row about numbers that has become both feral and arcane, the heads of Treasury, Finance and the Parliamentary Budget Office have called out Kevin Rudd's attempt to use their authority to discredit the opposition's savings figures.

It was a bureaucratic king hit the like of which we don't often see, and certainly not in election campaigns.

Treasury and Finance issued a joint statement which undercut the government's basing its claim that there was a A\$10 billion hole in the \$31.6 billion Coalition savings on official authority. Soon after the PBO did the same.

The public servants' intervention, though in strict terms only clarifying their roles, made it look like Labor was being tricky. And indeed it had attempted to be too clever by half.

The departments and PBO heads are not trying to be political. Their intention is the opposite — they want to show they're apolitical. But their intervention inevitably deals them into the middle of a ferocious political fight and has serious implications, especially when costings are so much at the centre of this election.

Treasury and Finance felt themselves caught in a very bad position, after Rudd, Chris Bowen and Penny Wong put out Treasury, Finance and PBO documents to back up their \$10 billion hole claim.

Bowen told their joint news conference that the assertion “is based on advice from the departments of Treasury and Finance and the Parliamentary Budget Office which we are releasing today”.

The government had the costings of known or anticipated Coalition initiatives done before the caretaker period, when it would not be able to get the bureaucrats to undertake them.

The material was there for use during the campaign.

When it was produced, the senior public servants were alarmed. At the news conference the costings were portrayed as accurate representations of the Coalition’s savings; it was acknowledged the work had been done earlier, but inevitably the reporting blurred the timing.

The department heads, Martin Parkinson in Treasury and Finance’s David Tune, knew that if they came out, it would be a strike against the government. If they did nothing, they would be compromised, and the Coalition — likely to be the government in a little over a week — would not forget it.

The pair then issued a joint statement clarifying their departments’ roles. They said they had been asked to prepare costings on policy options that the government gave them. The costings were completed and sent back to the government before the election was called. “This is consistent with long-standing practice,” the statement said.

These costings were not prepared under the Charter of Budget Honesty process. This provides for the public servants to cost election policies if the parties choose to submit them. In this election, the opposition has chosen to have its costings done by the new Parliamentary Budget Office, because it is more arms length from the government.

Treasury and Finance said pointedly that “at no stage prior to the caretaker period has either department costed opposition policies”.

They also noted that “different costing assumptions, such as the start date of a policy, take-up assumptions, indexation and the coverage that applies, will inevitably generate different financial outcomes.

“The financial implications of a policy may also differ depending on whether the costing is presented on an underlying cash balance or fiscal balance basis. The Treasury and Finance costings presented in the advice to government reported today were presented on an underlying cash balance basis.”

The opposition savings were prepared by the PBO on an accrual accounting basis.

The PBO said in its statement that all costings it does are “prepared on the basis of the policy specifications provided by the parliamentary party or individual parliamentarian requesting the policy costing”.

PBO head Phil Bowen said: “The PBO will not prepare costings of policies attributed to an individual parliamentarian or political party without the knowledge and active participation of that parliamentarian or political party in the costing process.

“When the PBO undertakes a confidential policy costing for an individual parliamentarian or political party, it relies solely on the policy details specified by that parliamentarian or political party.

“When an individual parliamentarian or a political party chooses to publicly release a PBO costing that has been prepared on a confidential basis for them, it is inappropriate to claim that the PBO has costed the policy of any other parliamentarian or political party.”

Bowen stressed: “Unless all of the policy specifications were identical, the financial implications of the policy could vary markedly.”

The public servants have behaved as they should, although Rudd won't be thanking them for it. The government ought not have put them in the position it did. It has previously tried to use Treasury for political purposes, and rows have erupted.

The treasurer described the decision to release the costings advice to the government as a "serious step". It turned out to be one of the many bad steps Labor has taken in this campaign. Bowen as treasurer should have anticipated that it was dangerous to take liberties with Treasury, already under pressure over its history of failed forecasts and periodically accused by the opposition of having been politicised.

Parkinson's future is not certain under a Coalition government. Apart from the matter of his own high integrity, he would have been a fool to have let himself be used by the government.

He is not a fool. He and his public servant colleagues understand how the system should work — they have stood up for their own reputations and those of their organisations.

Day 26: Abbott raises a cautious voice on Syria

Michelle Grattan
30 August 2013

Days after Kevin Rudd questioned whether Tony Abbott was too "impulsive" to handle international crises such as Syria, the opposition leader was sounding a good deal more measured than the prime minister on that issue.

It's true we don't have much guide to how, as prime minister, Abbott would conduct international relations, beyond the obvious (his strong commitment to the United States, his references to the anglosphere).

But leaders learn quickly to be comfortable on the world stage, as Julia Gillard showed, and today's crowded round of international conferences gives them an early education. If Abbott's elected, he will have to be off travelling soon (and that's apart from his promised immediate visit to Indonesia to discuss the boats).

Syria is providing both an early glimpse in (almost) real time of Abbott's approach, and throwing up an unexpected contrast with Rudd.

The prime minister this week has taken a very robust stance on the crisis. For days, and before the weapons inspectors have finished their work, he has been satisfied about the evidence of chemical weapons, the regime's guilt, and the need for action.

After speaking with president Barack Obama, British prime minister David Cameron and others, Rudd clearly felt things were moving towards quick intervention. With Australia about to take over the UN Security Council presidency and his own penchant for activist diplomacy, Rudd placed himself in the rhetorical vanguard.

Then came a serious complication: the British House of Commons voted against becoming involved, and Cameron ruled out being part of any strike. Now, with the United States in a more exposed position without Britain, it is less clear how the situation will unfold.

Today, Abbott gave a comprehensive rundown of his position, and he had a strong message: be cautious.

The first thing to do was to wait for the weapons inspectors' report and any Security Council resolutions.

Beyond that, he told a news conference: "It is the general disposition of the Australian government, regardless of whether it's a Labor government or a Coalition government, to support our friends and allies wherever we can"

But: "We should be very reluctant to get too involved in very difficult conflicts which we may not be readily able to influence

for good. We should be very careful about getting involved in a civil war between two deeply unsavoury sides.”

He said he had strongly supported Australian involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq: “But we have to digest the lessons of both of those interventions.”

Any action would be taken by countries with the capability to do so and Australia was not one of those. He played down any suggestion that Australia was a key player.

Abbott chose his words carefully. In questioning Abbott’s “temperament”, Rudd had said that in such situations “you have to sit back, think, calmly reflect and then work through what the best decision is”. Abbott was directly responding to Rudd when he said: “This is a time for cool heads. It’s not a time for intemperate action and it’s not a time for Australia to exaggerate its own role in what is a very difficult international situation.”

Rudd today reiterated that the Australian government had a high level of confidence that the Syrian regime had been responsible for the use of chemical weapons. He said the weapons inspectors’ observations were “one part of the overall proof test as to what has occurred”. He did, however, emphasise that there had been no request from the United States or elsewhere for any direct or indirect Australian military participation in any possible action.

Rudd also fired back at Abbott. If he became prime minister he would inherit the UN Security Council presidency: “You can’t wish it away because it’s not Tony Abbott’s preferred field of operations. I don’t believe Mr Abbott is comfortable or experienced in handling these questions.”

It is very possible Abbott’s caution would resonate more with the public than Rudd’s wish for international action.

The Campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry, headed by former defence department chief Paul Barratt, warned this week that “talk of brief limited military interventions should be treated with the greatest scepticism in the light of other recent wars in which Western countries have become bogged down since 2001”.

If the Americans do take action outside the United Nations — where the Russian veto would prevent the passage of a resolution to back a strike — this would be a test of Abbott’s cautionary policy.

He would be caught between what he has said already and his loyalty to the United States, which would be anxious to have the diplomatic support of as many allies as possible. You would bet loyalty would win.

Abbott’s Syrian comments also reflect a more limited enthusiasm for Australia’s role on the Security Council. Rudd would want to use that two-year spot to the hilt for his middle power diplomacy. Abbott seems to have little interest in doing so. The Liberals are less into multilateralism than Labor. Then there is the tribal element. Going after the seat was a Rudd initiative.

If the Liberals win, the Ambassador to the United Nations they will inherit is Gary Quinlan — a former Rudd adviser.

Day 27: Glasson gladiators fight the “Ruddy Future”

Michelle Grattan
31 August 2013

Bill Glasson is already a Liberal-National Party hero. The 60-year-old eye surgeon and prime ministerial challenger received special mention and a rousing response at Tony Abbott’s Liberal launch in Brisbane last Sunday.

Glasson and his “gladiators” have been giving Kevin Rudd a run for his money in the normally safe Labor seat of Griffith. A couple of polls have actually had Glasson ahead, although today’s JWS Research poll, published in the *Australian Financial Review*, has Rudd leading by a strong 57% to 43%.

Glasson himself says Rudd is in front, although he believes by much less than the latest poll.

The ophthalmologist is a rather out-of-the-ordinary sort of candidate. He wasn't even a party member when he decided to put his hand up to run for office.

His father, William, was a state MP from 1974 to 1989 and a minister in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's government. Son Bill was briefly in the party's youth section. But later his main "political" involvement was in the Australian Medical Association, of which he was president from 2003 to 2005.

It was in this role that he first had dealings with Abbott. As new health minister, Abbott inherited a crisis over medical indemnity insurance.

Glasson went to see him, with a slate of five demands from the AMA. In their talks, Abbott said the government could meet three of them at once; more work would have to be done on the other two.

Glasson looked the minister in the eye and said: "I reckon I can trust you. Don't let me down." Abbott didn't.

He describes the opposition leader — whose "Pollie Pedal" he regularly joins — as "a great bloke to work with" and insists he has a "very soft core".

Glasson comes originally from Winton in central western Queensland, where his family had five properties and ran 40,000 merinos. He was sent to boarding school — "Churchie", a well-known Anglican boys' school — in the Griffith electorate and has pretty much lived there ever since, apart from studying overseas.

He says he decided to run for the seat partly because he was "disgusted" about the "last six years with a bad government". While the government had some good ideas, its implementation had been poor and there had been "loss of trust". "Trust", "values" and "loyalty" are words that sprinkle through his conversation.

He has about him a touch of the man from the bush, and goes out several times a year to treat patients in remote Queensland.

(Queensland is a small world — Glasson fixed up former Labor treasurer Wayne Swan's eyes a few years ago.)

Since being endorsed as the local LNP candidate exactly a year ago, Glasson has mobilised an impressive on the ground operation. There are 600–650 “gladiators”, including party members and others who have just volunteered to help.

One of the more colourful is 85-year-old American “Bud”, who stands on the side of the road morning and night, gesticulating wildly at passing motorists.

For months, Glasson worked Monday, Tuesday and part of Wednesday at his practice and devoted the rest of the time to campaigning. Recently it has become a full-time job. He door-knocks relentlessly. Tomorrow, he and wife, Claire Jackson, Professor of Primary Care at the University of Queensland, will lead 100 “gladiators” in the 10-km Bridge to Brisbane race.

Griffith takes in inner suburbs of Brisbane, south of the river. Rudd failed in his first tilt to win it in 1996, a loss that he took hard. He won it in the 1998 election and is now on an 8.5% margin, making it the safest Labor seat in Queensland.

According to the ABC's Vote Compass — where people can check their place on the political spectrum — Griffith is one of the more socially progressive electorates in the mostly conservative Queensland landscape. (Glasson, incidentally, supports gay marriage.)

Rudd has always been a very active local member, popping up at community festivals, holding stalls at school fetes, giving away 900 “Rudd bikes” for fundraisers, and even happy to join in the odd “Chicken Dance” with primary school kids.

As restored leader, however, he hasn't been able to spend a lot of time in the electorate. But the family has been mobilised. He said recently: “My wife, Therese, and my daughter, Jess, and others have been out attending to a whole range of things in my local community. But I'm ultimately pretty relaxed about the judgement of the Australian people. Whether it's in Brisbane or

around the country — it's a democracy, and they make the choice.”

Residents of Griffith this week received in their letterbox a giant fold-out *Rudd Report* leaflet with 15 pictures of their local member out and about everywhere, and a big map full of symbols of achievement for the community.

From a drive through Griffith today, it looked as though the Gladiators well outnumbered the Ruddites. Glasson had 50 street corners covered. The political battle in this electorate is very visible, with many signs up.

On one street corner, campaigners in “It's Our Ruddy Future” t-shirts were handing out Kevin Rudd bags (with the “dd” turned into glasses — presumably to fit the nerdy image).

One of the workers said the prime minister was expected to be campaigning in the electorate early in the week.

Rudd today flew back to Brisbane from Darwin to prepare for tomorrow's launch in the city's convention centre.

Rudd is expected to unveil new promises, as he tries to get momentum after a difficult few days, in which the strain began to show at yesterday's fractious news conference in Perth.

Rudd went into the campaign very optimistic that he could pick up a significant number of Queensland seats. The latest polling indicates that unless something extraordinary happens in the final frantic days, this hope won't be realised. But Labor does expect it can hold off the Glasson gladiators.

Glasson repeatedly challenges Rudd to say whether he plans to serve a full term if re-elected and Labor is in opposition. Asked if he would be up for another run if there were a by-election, Glasson says: “I'd have to ask my wife”.

Day 28: Rudd seeks to defy gravity

Michelle Grattan

1 September 2013

Kevin Rudd's launch was all about political hope against the odds, but treasurer Chris Bowen's absence was the measure of electoral reality.

Bowen missed this campaign landmark — with Rudd's permission — to attend back-to-back church functions in his western Sydney electorate of McMahan.

McMahan's margin is 7.8%, normally solid, but Bowen is in terrible danger. A JWS Research poll in Saturday's *Financial Review* had Bowen on 46.9% to the 53.1% of the Liberal candidate, controversial former policeman Ray King.

Bowen, one of Labor's young high-fliers and a possible future leader, did not need to hear Rudd say that "we are now engaged in the fight of our lives". He is one of those in the trenches with bullets raining down.

The launch relived earlier Labor glories. Bob Hawke received the great reception to which he has become accustomed. Paul Keating's ego was boosted when a woman in the crowd called out that he was "easy on the eye".

Deputy prime minister Anthony Albanese revved up the audience with a mixture of easy informality and political punch: "If you want a bloke who can jump through tyres, vote Tony Abbott. If you want a bloke who can guide you through the next financial crisis, vote Kevin Rudd."

Rudd in his speech lasered in on the voters that Bowen was out trying to court.

His cheap (A\$268.5 million) packet of promises was all about jobs and small business. He was after the "battlers" who, according to the polls, have hitched their fortunes to Abbott.

Rudd talked not just about jobs as such, but job security, proposing a new network that would better match those who lost jobs to new opportunities or training.

It's probably a worthy initiative, and perhaps a necessary one, but it did sound elaborately bureaucratic.

More provocatively, Rudd appeared to be shaping up for a fight on a new front with the states.

Labor says the states must not cut TAFE further and must agree to maintain real growth in it. If they refuse to at least maintain funding in real terms, a Labor government would quarantine part of the money it provides to the states and earmark it specifically for TAFEs.

If the states continued to refuse to guarantee funding, the federal government would fund TAFEs directly.

Eventually, if states sought to frustrate such new arrangements, the federal government would direct its TAFE funding into a new TAFE Australia Network. In other words, it would effectively seek to take over the system.

This seemed very Kevin '07, when he said the states must shape up over their hospitals or the Commonwealth would try to take over. That ended in argument and a good many tears before compromise was reached.

The TAFE system is critically important, but it's questionable whether Rudd is wise to risk stirring up the premiers, who are mostly Liberal, into a fight during the last week of the campaign.

Rudd's pledge to make business projects worth \$300 million or more (down from the present \$500 million) adopt Australian Industry Participation Plans is another example of his "economic nationalism" on the march. It follows his concern last week about foreign investment in Australian land and his announcement to bring forward naval ship building projects to maintain work.

If Rudd's speech was taken in isolation it could be seen as a strong and spirited effort.

But Labor's problem is one of context — context of the government's difficulties and blunders over the last six years, and the context of Rudd's own history. It is simply not possible for Labor to adequately deal with that past. The slogan of "a new way" (behind Rudd on the stage) has, all through this campaign, simply brought to mind questions about the "old way".

Rudd acknowledged that Labor did not always get things right. But his folksy excuse is unlikely to wash with many voters: "As a highly successful migrant who came here after the war told me the other day in Adelaide, 'Kevin, the only blokes who don't make mistakes are the blokes who don't do anything.'"

The prime minister sought to link Labor's current story, through its values, with those of past governments, speaking of "values that built a university system accessible for all under Gough Whitlam; values that built Medicare for all under Bob Hawke; values that built DisabilityCare for all under Julia Gillard; values that built superannuation for all under Paul Keating".

The acknowledgement of Gillard was tactful and appropriate. But the absence of Gillard, who had said in a statement last week that she would not attend the launch because her presence would just "distract" from Rudd's message, was more telling than the prime minister's reference.

Rudd told the faithful they should "never, ever, ever, underestimate my fighting spirit ... I have been in tougher spots than this before and come back from behind"

The most notable tough spot from which he has escaped is the backbench. His return just in time to fight this campaign was extraordinary. But to become (as a young kid he quoted today hopes) the "comeback kid" in this election would be beyond extraordinary.

Day 29: Abbott makes it all about carbon

Michelle Grattan
2 September 2013

In his last set piece occasion of the campaign, at Canberra's National Press Club, Tony Abbott returned to the issue that, more than any other, started him on the road to the victory the Coalition expects to clinch on Saturday.

It was the carbon tax that landed Abbott, to the surprise of colleagues and even himself, in the leadership, after Joe Hockey, a supporter of Malcolm Turnbull's emissions trading scheme, would not do the U-turn his party wanted.

Then Abbott seized the carbon issue to get traction against Kevin Rudd and later Julia Gillard. He was helped by circumstances: the Copenhagen conference's failure; Rudd's backtracking from what he had promoted as a great moral challenge; most notably, Gillard's breach of her "no carbon tax" promise.

Despite criticism of his own "Direct Action", including at times the little disguised scepticism of Turnbull, the carbon issue has been costly for Labor and politically good to Abbott, especially because he could marry it to "trust".

"The carbon tax is where Labor's economic deficit and Labor's trust deficit coincide," he said in today's speech.

"More than anything, this election is a referendum on the carbon tax. A Coalition victory, should it happen, will be a warning from alienated Labor voters to their leaders: never again sell Labor's soul to another party."

He added, in what is a throw-forward to an Abbott government: "That's why it's unimaginable that a defeated Labor party would persist with a carbon tax. It would just confirm that Labor is incapable of learning from its mistakes."

If Abbott becomes prime minister, this needs to be true or the early period of his government would become very messy.

The Greens may well lose their sole balance of power in the Senate at the election, but the new Senate does not come into until mid-next year.

But Abbott declares scrapping the carbon tax a central and instant priority: “Building a strong economy will start from day one of a Coalition government’s first term as soon as the instructions are issued to start preparing the carbon tax repeal legislation. Elect the Coalition and, within a year, the carbon tax will be gone so power prices will be down in the order of 10% and gas prices will be down in the order of 9%.”

If Abbott in government could not obtain his repeal legislation, it would not just be a political blow. He has promised — and reaffirmed this today in an interview with *The Conversation* — that he would go to a double dissolution on the issue. An early election is the last thing that a Coalition government, or the public, would want.

A defeated ALP might not want it either, so his calculation could well be correct. Or, if the election produces a Senate with right-leaning crossbenchers having the balance of power after June, a Coalition government could eventually negotiate the repeal through, even if Labor held firm against it.

That’s all for the future. Right now, Abbott hammers the cost of the carbon price (“the cumulative loss in GDP between now and 2050 is A\$1 trillion”), and the claimed benefits of being without it: “An economy that’s 3% bigger or \$40 billion a year wealthier could much more readily afford the Gonski school changes and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.”

As for Direct Action, he professes confidence a Coalition government could achieve its commitment to a 5% reduction in emissions target by 2020, with the about \$3 billion over four years that it is allocating. But if it can’t, it appears it will be the target, not the money, that will have to give.

“We are very confident that we can achieve the domestic emissions reductions within the funding envelope that we’ve provided,” he said, arguing it was in the economic interests of business to try to reduce costly inputs. “And often its most costly inputs, apart from labour, are fuel and power.

“So please, never underestimate the ordinary economic imperative to emit less ... I also think it’s easy to underestimate the emissions reduction potential in the agricultural sector.

“But the bottom line is that we will spend as much as we have budgeted, no more and no less. We will get as much environmental improvement, as much emissions reduction as we can for the spending that we’ve budgeted. We are very confident that we will achieve the 5% target that we’ve set ourselves. We’re very confident that we can achieve that, but in the end we’ve told you the money we’ll spend and we won’t spend any more.”

So there you have it. Fighting the carbon price has so far been mostly upside for Abbott, but if he becomes prime minister things get more complicated because the onus is on him.

First, he would have to get rid of the carbon tax, without losing too much political skin.

Second, its abolition would have to produce the benefits he has claimed or he would be held to account for creating false expectations.

And third, his direct action plan would need to deliver what he asserts it can — which may involve some heroic assumptions — or he’d be seen as letting Australia down at home and abroad.

At one level, today’s National Press Club speech was all about a cautious candidate with an election lead determined to avoid final week mistakes. Viewed from a longer term perspective, Abbott has set himself some tough hurdles for the future.

Day 30: What you think about mandates depends on where you sit

Michelle Grattan
3 September 2013

In election campaigns it is always best to avoid the sticky paper, especially in the final days. But that's where Labor found itself today, cornered into talking about what its stance might be in opposition on the carbon tax.

Tony Abbott this week has made a point of his argument that if he is elected he will have a mandate for the tax's repeal — and he's committed to a double dissolution if he's frustrated. This immediately had Labor being questioned on how it would react.

When climate change minister Mark Butler went on the ABC this morning, one would presume his main aim was to attack Abbott's flagging that if it came to a choice between ditching the 5% emissions reduction target or increasing the funding needed to meet it, the target would go. But instead, Butler was relentlessly pursued about Labor's likely response when presented with repeal legislation. This exchange occurred.

Host: "Labor would be prepared to, if it came to it, stick to its guns and send the electorate to a double dissolution?"

Butler: "Labor has a very clear position on this and it wouldn't be of any surprise to the Australian people, I'm sure, that we would be voting on the position that we took to the election and not the position that Tony Abbott takes."

Victorian MP Kelvin Thomson was blunt: "If I get elected to the parliament I've got a mandate to support the policies on which I was elected."

Kevin Rudd tried to dodge when he came under a barrage of questioning, but did say: "Our policy is to support carbon pricing through an emissions trading scheme into the future. You know why? When the judgement is made from the vantage point

of history in 20, 30, 40, 50 years' time, when all your kids and grandkids are walking around the place asking what is happening to the planet, we want to be on the right side of history as having stood up for the right policies.”

There is no upside for Labor in this mandate debate. It is assuming a Coalition win and taking attention off the messages Rudd needs to get through in these last days.

It was very different in the run-up to the 1993 election when prime minister Paul Keating said that if Labor was in opposition it would wave through the Coalition's proposed Fightback' GST. In that case, he was warning the ALP would not try to stand in the way of a Coalition government imposing an unpopular tax. In this instance, the debate is about the Coalition wanting to take off an unpopular tax.

What position Labor in opposition actually took would depend on who was leader, what condition Labor was in, and how an Abbott government was travelling.

There are conflicting precedents. After the 1998 election, Labor voted against John Howard's GST, which forced him into negotiating with the Democrats. Its opposition did not do the ALP any discernible good.

In contrast, after its 2007 loss, the Coalition did not resist Labor's repeal of WorkChoices. Even though it still found itself later subject to a scare campaign that enabled it to move on from what had been a politically disastrous policy.

In all Abbott's talk about the mandate he will have, it is worth noting his own view in other circumstances. He wrote after the Howard government's 2007 defeat: “[Opposition leader Brendan] Nelson is right to resist the intellectual bullying inherent in talk of ‘mandates’. What exactly is Rudd's mandate anyway: to be an economic conservative or an old-fashioned Christian socialist? The elected opposition is no less entitled than the elected government to exercise judgement and to try to keep its election commitments.”

The Greens are unequivocal about their position on the mandate issue. They would use their Senate numbers to try to block the repeal.

At her news conference today, Milne cast the Greens not just as a restraint on Abbott but a spine stiffener for Labor. “The Greens will work with whoever we can in the parliament for stronger action on global warming and I think we will be needed there to keep the Labor party on track,” she said.

The mandate argument is particularly tricky when it comes to the Senate. With the lower house, a mandate surely exists when a party has won a clear majority and an issue (such as carbon pricing) has been at the centre of the campaign.

But the campaign of the Greens, who currently have sole balance of power in the Senate, is all about being an upper house check on whoever is in government.

People voting Green in the Senate would range from those thinking that everything an Abbott government did should be blocked where possible to those who want the upper house to be just a light restraining hand.

The Greens have a mandate to be a Senate watchdog, but how hard that dog should bite is another matter. The issue becomes the precise nature of their mandate, and how it relates to the mandate of the government.

It’s possible that several minor players could share the Senate balance of power after June. One of these, independent Nick Xenophon, seems certain to be re-elected with a quota of his own. Another, John Madigan, from the DLP, who is not up this time, won on a tiny vote. Any microparty (or parties) that gets up a Senate candidate at the election would not have achieved anything like a quota in its own right.

The notion of Senate odds and sods individually or collectively having a national “mandate” to do anything is a nonsense. Yet it is possibly they who might be the ultimate deciders on crucial pieces of legislation including, if Labor hung tough, the Abbott carbon tax repeal.

Day 31: Rudd and Abbott talk on to a diminishing audience

Michelle Grattan
4 September 2013

For almost two million Australian voters, this election is over. They've marked their ballots. As of yesterday, 1.2 million of the 14.7 million on the roll had put in pre-poll votes and 750,000 postal votes had been received by the Australian Electoral Commission.

Then there are another 1.2 million people who have not bothered to enrol. One third of them (400,000) are aged 18–24.

As Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott try to make the most of these dying campaign days, there are a lot of people they can't reach, including those yet to vote but with minds firmly made up.

Their target audience was quantified in this week's Essential poll. Of those who indicated their voting intention, 15% said it was "quite possible" they would change their mind. This figure has narrowed significantly during the campaign and more recently: it was 21% on August 5, 17% on August 19 and 18% on August 26.

Only 9% of Coalition voters said it was quite possible they would change compared with 14% of ALP supporters, 17% of Green voters and 39% of people presently parked in the "other" category.

As the Labor camp increasingly accepts the apparent inevitability of defeat, its pessimism is reflected in the fact that Rudd's travel is skewed to ALP seats rather than seeking out Coalition ones. But the face must be kept brave. "We're going to secure the come-from-behind win," Rudd told enthusiastic young fans.

But already there is some "what if" talk. Asked by the ABC's Jon Faine whether he should have gone to the polls faster, Rudd

said: “I think there’s no point in having retrospectives about any of that, Jon. We had some things we had to attend to as a government.”

Rudd has honed down his messages for these last days. Labor will protect jobs, Abbott will cut. If you have doubts about Abbott, don’t vote for him. These are the lines strategists believe can maximise the ALP vote.

Labor today was still beating the drum about costings. Abbott again repeated his (untenable) claim that he could not release all the numbers until the last policy had been announced. (He could have put out the figures ages ago with an amount for unannounced policy, as was done in the recent economic statement.) He produced the last policy today but the costings will come tomorrow, after tonight’s advertising blackout. Labor knows it has been outplayed in the costings cat-and-mouse game but intends to make the most of social media. A letter from “Kevin” emailed to supporters today, asking for donations, said: “We’re taking our message to millions of people online.... During this blackout period, we can let millions of people know about Mr Abbott’s brutal cuts to the bone.” On the Liberal side, an appeal for donations went out today under John Howard’s name.

All through this campaign Rudd has seethed about the role of Rupert Murdoch. Now, as it draws to an end, Labor is furious at the behaviour of Roger Corbett, the chairman of Fairfax, and a member of the Reserve Bank Board. In an extraordinarily strong attack, the more potent because of its timing, Corbett told yesterday’s ABC *Lateline*: “Kevin Rudd is a leader that has been really discredited by his own conduct. His colleagues sacked him because they judged him to be incapable as PM. He, it’s alleged, was active against the government during the [2010] elections — maybe true, may not be.

“The perception was that had a terrible effect upon Labor and probably put them into a position where they needed to enter into coalition with the Greens, which was a very limiting factor in

their last three years and they were destabilised in that last three years.

“So here’s a man that really has done the Labor party enormous damage, destabilised it and is now wishing to present himself to the Australian people as a PM and as the incoming PM. I don’t think the Australian people will cop that, to be quite honest, and I think that’s very sad for the Labor party.”

One reason for the intensity of Labor’s anger is that neither the program nor Corbett said he was a member of the Liberal party. The program didn’t know.

Questioned about Corbett, Rudd got in a couple of barbs, but was restrained. Parliamentary secretary Doug Cameron, however, let loose, saying it was “outrageous” that Corbett had not disclosed his party membership and should resign from the bank’s board.

The Corbett appearance was awkward, to say the least, for Fairfax, which has recently sought to take advantage of the furore surrounding the political antics of the Murdoch media by launching a campaign with the slogan “Independent. Always”. Corbett stressed he was at arms length from Fairfax’s editorial content, but to have its chairman suddenly in the middle of the political fray was not a good look.

There will be many narratives to look back on after this campaign. One of them will be all about the media.

Day 32: Rudd finds himself outfoxed again on Abbott’s costings

Michelle Grattan

5 September 2013

Kevin Rudd has put the spectre of an Abbott government’s swingeing cuts at the centre of his campaign. But at every turn, he has found himself tactically out-manoevred by the Coalition.

Despite intense pressure on him to release his costings earlier, Tony Abbott held them back until today.

This put them at the very end of the campaign, so there is minimum time for scrutiny and argument, and conveniently after the TV advertising black-out. But the opposition was not satisfied with that. Its final taunt at Rudd was to schedule its news conference for 2:30 pm — exactly an hour after Rudd finished his appearance at the National Press Club.

That meant the prime minister could only attack the costings in general terms. Anything too specific risked getting the wrong grab onto the TV nightly news bulletins. Notably, for once he did not repeat his claim about Abbott having a A\$70 billion funding hole.

The opposition has been canny in its savings targets. It proposes to take \$4.5 billion out of the foreign aid budget over four years, which offsets its nearly \$5 billion infrastructure program. Abbott wants to be the “infrastructure prime minister”, not the leader with an international heart.

On moral grounds, this cut is reprehensible. As Tim Costello points out, Australia is one of the few countries with a growing economy. We should be able to afford a greater level of foreign aid, and we were already committed to it. When their backs are up against the fiscal wall, neither side has any compunction with hoeing into this area. The government has previously done so.

But politically it is a soft target — which is no doubt one reason why it is a target. There is a vocal constituency committed to foreign aid, but it is small. The issue is not a mass vote changer. Most people just don't care enough. The opposition is running the line to voters that we can't afford to send so much aid overseas aid when we have economic challenges at home. Most voters won't be too fussed by international need.

We should have seen this coming. In 2011 there was a stoush in the Coalition over foreign aid. Abbott wanted to cut assistance to Africa; the plan was resisted by foreign affairs spokeswoman

Julie Bishop. She had a victory in the compromise that was worked out. This time Bishop is just sucking it up.

Raiding foreign aid has made it easier to avoid cuts in areas such as health and education, which can be vote changers.

The opposition appears to have taken maximum care in the preparation of its costings. It knew it could not afford a repeat of its 2010 experience, for which it paid a political price. For that election it used private accountants, who were later found to have acted unprofessionally; after the election, when Treasury costed the opposition policies during Abbott's negotiations with cross-benchers, a large hole emerged.

This time, the Coalition has been able, and chosen, to use the new Parliamentary Budget Office. (Pity the poor officials in that office in the run-up to the election — they must be grease spots by now after the amount of work they've had to do.) The PBO is both qualified and credible and part of the Charter of Budget Honesty process. Under the charter, the opposition has the choice of going to the Treasury or the PBO, and chose the latter, which is at more of an arm's length away from the government.

Just to put an extra layer of credibility onto the numbers, the opposition appointed an eminent persons' group to sign off on them, comprising Peter Shergold, a former head of the prime minister's department, Len Scanlan, former Queensland auditor general, and Geoff Carmody, a respected private sector economic consultant.

The numbers have the budget bottom line more than \$6 billion better off than under the government over the forward estimates. This small amount means that the overall fiscal picture is little different from Labor's. The opposition is not going for an austerity policy, as the government claims.

Despite having its numbers out, the opposition is not willing to pledge to a timetable for return to surplus. Having seen the traumas of the Gillard government, which had to jetti-

son what had been a firm promise, the Coalition has no intention of making such a rod for itself.

For all the reassurance from the Coalition, there remains an air of unreality about these numbers, or any other numbers that could be produced.

Given how the budget has deteriorated dramatically over recent years, no-one can be sure of what lies ahead on the revenue front. The economic outlook is uncertain. The numbers for later years in the forward estimates could be changed dramatically by events beyond the policy-makers' control.

Within a Coalition government's control would be its proposed commission of audit, charged with combing through government programs.

Inevitably this would produce many proposals for savings in programs and even for scrapping some.

Abbott was asked today whether some areas would be quarantined from the audit's examination.

"I'm very happy to have the commission of audit go through the whole of the administration, to tell us whether, in their opinion, they think things can be done better, and where things can be done better, more frugally, more prudently, with more benefit for taxpayers. Surely it would be a foolish government that would ignore that," Abbott said.

Rudd, correctly, jumped on this statement. The Coalition has a get-out-of-jail card. It could of course reject some recommendations from the commission. Equally, it could decide that the commission had made an overwhelming case on many fronts.

The commission of audit is a sensible idea. Programs should be reviewed periodically. But let's be clear. It would be an agent of change.

Day 33: Plenty of election stories within the big story

Michelle Grattan
6 September 2013

So much for the battle. Now for the night in front of the TV. Once you take in the headline result, which might not be all that long in coming, here are eight things to keep an eye on.

1. The fight for the Victorian seat of Indi. Well-respected independent candidate Cathy McGowan, locally born and bred, has run a formidable campaign and is a real threat to feisty Liberal frontbencher Sophie Mirabella, who has lost popularity in her seat. Mirabella is an Abbott favourite; it would be an irony if he had a thumping win and she lost the chance to share it. Well-informed local sources say Indi is too close to call.
2. What happens to treasurer Chris Bowen. He helped restore Kevin Rudd as leader, but has been struggling in his western Sydney seat of McMahon (7.8%). Labor MPs are sounding desperate out there: home affairs minister Jason Clare (Blaxland 12.2%) in an eleventh hour appeal said: “Whatever happens tomorrow, you’re going to need people like me, people like Chris Bowen, that will hold Tony Abbott to account if he becomes prime minister.” Both Bowen and Clare are possible future leadership material.
3. First indications of who will win the sixth Queensland Senate seat. It’s a contest that could see a victory for Clive Palmer’s PUP (his candidate is ex-rugby league player Glenn Lazarus) or Bob Katter’s KAP (he’s running singer James Blundell). Or it could end up with someone else emerging out of the byzantine preference flows.

If the Greens lose their sole balance of power in the Senate, an Abbott government would be negotiating with assorted minnows. Hence the interest in the Queensland seat, though it could be quite a while before the result is finalised.

4. Will Eden-Monaro retain its status (since 1972) as a “bellwether” seat, always held by the government? Local member Mike Kelly, Minister for Defence material has been “pretend” defence minister since Rudd promised him that post if Labor was re-elected. (The actual defence minister, Stephen Smith, is not recontesting his seat of Perth. He finds himself in a rather odd position: he is no longer an MP but continues as a minister until a new government is formed.) Kelly knows he won’t now be getting the defence ministry; tomorrow will determine whether he holds his seat against the challenge from Peter Hendy, former Liberal staffer and one-time chief executive of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
5. Whether Green Adam Bandt (Melbourne) and independent Andrew Wilkie (Denison) can hold on. Unlike 2010, Bandt doesn’t have Liberal preferences, but has dug in; the anti-gambling Wilkie is favourite to hold his seat on current betting odds. He is being preferenced by the Liberals, although a risk for him is that the Liberals poll better than Labor and sneak across the line on ALP preferences.
6. How high can he fly? South Australian senator Nick Xenophon is expected to get well over a quota (14.3%) in his own right, a remarkable achievement. Xenophon was elected in 2007 on a no pokies platform — but neither he nor Wilkie were able to secure reform on that front. (Scrapping the proposed ACT pre-commitment trial is one of Tony Abbott’s savings —Xenophon says he will fight it.) One of the best retail politicians around, Xenophon shared the balance of

power in 2008–11 with Family First. Depending on the wider Senate result, he could be in a balance of power position again from July.

7. How Rudd fares in Griffith. The prime minister hasn't been able to spend much time on his home turf where eye surgeon and former Australian Medical Association president Bill Glasson has mounted a formidable assault on his 8.5% margin. (The Liberals have blitzed voters with last-minute reading matter; the Glasson Gladiators have posted an entertaining *One Day More* video on YouTube.)

Labor says it's confident of holding Griffith but what will Rudd do after the election? Surely he wouldn't serve another three years in Parliament. Doesn't some international job beckon? If not, it should — Labor needs to put the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era behind it. If Rudd did quit his seat, prompting a byelection, Glasson could have a good chance of winning it.

8. Dummy spits. A highlight of election nights, because you never know where they might come from. Cheryl Kernot did a great one in 1998, when she lashed out at the Labor party for not giving her a better seat. The special interest in this election is how the old Gillard forces, people like former deputy prime minister, Wayne Swan, who have been quiet as mice during the campaign, will react when it's all over.