

## MAXINE'S STORY FROM THE TRENCHES vs JULIA'S STORY FROM THE BENCHES

John Biggs

### Maxine McKew enters Parliament

After years as a highly respected political reporter, Maxine McKew, in *Tales from the Political Trenches*, describes how she wanted to be a player not a voyeur, as Keating put it. She was approached by the right faction NSW to have a “safe seat” in the 2004 election but in return they demanded her loyalty to that faction. Disgusted, she wanted to be beholden to nobody, except perhaps to Kevin Rudd who she greatly admired. Her husband Labor veteran Bob Hogg suggested she put herself forward in the 2007 election for Howard's seat in Bennelong. She ran an intense but clean campaign, specifically avoiding disparaging her opponent – not orthodox Labor campaigning – and won, thereby making political history. Rudd and his team won in 2007, the size of their victory making more political history.

Once in parliament, however, McKew didn't see much of Rudd: he was frenetically busy. His office posted dot-point phrases all politicians had to echo when talking to the press, inevitably making them sound robotic and insincere. McKew had plenty of good things to say about her field of early childhood education and said so to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Next, at 6am, Rudd's minder Lachlan Harris was on the phone blasting the hell out of her for talking outside the guidelines for the day. Servile obedience was not what politics was about; doing a good job within your remit was. Or so she had thought.

She had been looking forward to participating in a “contest of ideas”, which Keating had told her was what politics was all about, only to discover that MPs of less than ministerial status had little or no input. Instead, Rudd, Gillard, Swan and Lindsay Tanner – the Gang of Four – were running things themselves. Ministers outside this “kitchen cabinet” might well present their case for a given policy within their area, to be excluded when a decision was being taken. McKew was shocked at the power the faction leaders had: “apparatchiks whose aim was self-advancement” who seemed unconcerned about the good of Australia, or even the good of the party, as later events showed. Rudd, like McKew herself, was atypical in the ALP in that neither of them had a union background and were not beholden to any factions. This, she says was a major reason why Rudd was deposed.

McKew found she didn't like the way politics was played. The real enemy, she was told early in her parliamentary career, was more likely to be sitting beside her rather than on the opposite benches. Competition was fierce in a zero-sum game: your promotion meant that someone had lost. To get on you had to have “look at me” profile, ask shrill even silly questions, denounce the opposition in the media, but never deviate from the orders of the day.

### Rudd's “ambush”

As for what she calls the “ambush”, meetings of the chief conspirators – Gillard, Swan, Mark Arbib, Paul Howes, Bill Shorten and others – had been ongoing since January 2009, six months prior to Rudd's “knifing”. McKew's anger at the attack is palpable. If Rudd was as bad as his erstwhile colleagues had claimed, she finds it incredible that not one minister warned Rudd to lift his game or there might be a takeover. She says: “It is surely beyond tolerable that a modern party can have its fortunes determined by half a dozen large trade union leaders who see themselves as more

influential than the party's elected parliamentarians." Outside this cabal, a majority of the party sided with Gillard but several admitted later to McKew that they had been misled and manipulated; in retrospect they deeply regretted that they had fallen for it.

Gillard of course tells a very different story. *My Story*, written after the 2013 elections when she had left Parliament, tells her version of events. The book is in two sections: *How I did it*, which is all about her tactics in deposing Rudd, and *Why I did it*, which outlines her beliefs and values and her views on various policies. The how and the why should be logically interrelated and it is perhaps typical of her that she keeps them separate: she sees herself in Section 2 as a wood person, but Section 1 is all about the trees. So which is "the real Julia", the tactician or the policy strategist? The pragmatic "why" – why she stood against Rudd – is not about policy but about the fact that as she and others saw it, governance under Rudd was chaotic. As she said: "the closer you were to the centre of the Rudd Labor Government the more critical you were of Kevin."

McKew's view, like that of many others, was that Rudd had won a massive victory in 2007, his approval rating in the polls at 66%, he made the long-awaited apology to indigenous Australians, ratified the Kyoto protocol, brought Australia through the GFC with hardly a bump, brought Australia into the prestigious G20 group of countries, declared climate change "the greatest moral challenge of our time" and promised stern measures to combat it, implemented a home insulation scheme as one of those measures (spoilt by some cowboy contractors for which he somewhat unfairly received the blame). In short, Rudd was a resounding success as PM although by 2010 public support declined over several mishaps: the mining super-profits tax which was bungled, carbon pricing had been delayed, and his humane policies on asylum seekers saw a sharp rise in boat arrivals. Nevertheless, his ratings at this time were not as low as Howard's had been in his first term or even Keatings in 1993, yet both were re-elected. To replace a PM with Rudd's sort of record, and who had been personally elected as PM, with someone who had not been elected as PM, was seen by many as an outrage.

McKew's version of the reason for the ambush, quoting a Labor MP, was that "Rudd treated some of the factional operatives like shit, which is to his eternal credit. He wasn't going to let them run his government and nor should he. He was contemptuous of them. They thought, we'll show you. And they did." (p.160). In McKew's words, he "didn't genuflect and kiss the ring" of the small group who saw themselves as the owners of the Labor Party.

Gillard agrees that Rudd did indeed treat his colleagues like shit, right from the start: summoning MPs to his office and making them wait often for hours, cancelling appointments well into their wait, ferocious temper tantrums that sometimes reduced male and female colleagues alike to tears, convening committees then over-riding their recommendations, making spur of the moment headlines that threw plans into chaos. What concerned Gillard and colleagues even more was that when the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference on climate change in Copenhagen had folded in disagreement – which in an extraordinary public statement Rudd said had been "ratfucked" by China – Rudd had slipped into a mental state that made him incapable of leading the government: "it was my strong belief that after some recovery time, his (KR's) dominant emotion would be relief – he had become so wretched as leader." In other words: "I can see you are unhappy in your job, so I'll take your job away from you. I'm sure you will be relieved and even thank me!" He was not relieved as his later behaviour showed.

Gillard said that in January 2010 she tried to get him to decide on when to call an election and to start implementing his policies, particularly those on climate change, but he became increasingly impossible to deal with. And that, she and several colleagues decided by June, was no way to run the country. He had to be replaced, especially with an election looming.

### **Action on Climate Change**

A major difference between McKew's and Gillard's accounts is on climate change. Gillard says she was always persuaded by the science on climate change and was strongly in favour of taking measures against it. She recalls that that has been Labor policy since both Hawke and Keating governments signed on to the UN convention on climate change, ratifying it in 1993, which led in turn to the Kyoto Protocol. Howard signed this Protocol but negotiated massive reductions for Australia and then refused to ratify it.

Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* made climate change a popular issue that forced Howard's hand and by 2007 both Labor and Liberals promised to create a market-based Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). By 2008, however, public interest had cooled off due to several factors: the cost of reducing carbon, soaring electricity bills, the GFC, the failure of the Copenhagen Conference, questioning the science by some rogue nonclimate scientists and by out and out charlatans, all of whom got massive coverage particularly in the Murdoch press, with Tony Abbott claiming that "the argument behind climate change is absolute crap."

Although Rudd reacted very badly to this change in public concern, a carbon pollution reduction scheme (CPRS) had been worked out by December 2008, targeting 15% below 2000 emissions by 2020. Wong, Swan and Rudd were a subcommittee to work out strategy on this basis but Rudd changed meetings on a whim, progress was slow. Rudd then decided to postpone implementation by a year to allow business to recover from GFC, but on the other hand he increased the target to 25% by 2020 in order to assuage environmentalists. Rudd thought he could take the CPRS to the December 2009 Copenhagen Conference to show how Australia was leading the world but the CPRS was defeated in the Senate in August, the Greens siding with Liberals. The Greens had made a bad mistake: had they voted with Labor, a carbon reduction scheme would have been in place for nearly six years by now.

Malcolm Turnbull, then Opposition leader, and Rudd were negotiating a bipartisan deal but because of the hard right in the Liberal Party, Turnbull was defeated as Leader by one vote and that was the end of any bipartisanship on action against climate change. The Opposition as Gillard says "went from divided but mostly rational on carbon pricing, to united and irrational almost overnight" (p.370).

A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Peter Hartcher, a friend of Rudd's, gained immediate traction: that "Gillard was determined to stop Rudd proceeding with the scheme". Gillard says this is quite wrong: "The suggestion that he was too weak to stand up to me if he wanted to is absurd." Hartcher's report, undoubtedly sourced from Rudd, and the confusion between a tax and a trading scheme, led to a widespread belief that Gillard had used climate change action in an unprincipled and opportunistic way: *for* action in the 2007 election, *against* action in order to discredit Rudd, and *for* action again when doing a deal with the Greens. In her own account however she was consistent throughout but she and colleagues were thwarted by Rudd's dilly-dallying.

Post Copenhagen Rudd wanted to move to a direct action scheme like Abbott's. Gillard and Penny Wong tried to dissuade him as it was "obviously policy nonsense". During 2010 Rudd was not campaigning on carbon reduction whereas Abbott was kicking goals with his own strident messages. Gillard proposed postponing legislation until a bipartisan agreement could be formed, which seems naïve, given Opposition's hard-line policy was up and running. Worse, a cabinet leak said that the CPRS was to be taken out of the budget and was effectively off the agenda. All of this, a product of bad luck and bad management, did severe damage to Labor's credibility on climate change.

Gillard's account of action on climate change sees nonaction as mostly Rudd's fault. McKew, on the other hand, makes no bones about what she sees as Gillard's position: Gillard "wanted plans for an emissions trading scheme junked and from the beginning of 2010 never let up in putting forward this point. ... She thought the government should drop the whole idea of an ETS because it had become electoral poison. ... She told Rudd that under no circumstance would she support the case for an election based on the need for action on climate change." (McKew, pp 172, 173).

### **Who to believe?**

Gillard's account might be read as overly defensive but on the other hand McKew was not herself present on any of these discussions, so how would she know who said what? If her source was Rudd or his "cavaliers" then that's what they would say about Gillard. It seems both are partially correct. Gillard was in the end for postponing the CPRS, which could be interpreted as her seeing it as electoral poison at a particular time when Abbott was scoring goals on "this toxic tax".

Gillard's performance re climate change as probably due more to poor management, on both her part and especially Rudd's, as to cynical opportunism. "There will be no carbon tax under the government I lead" but then passing the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) was a bad look, earning her the title of liar. But she didn't lie: the CPRS is not a tax. A carbon tax implies that the government would simply tax companies for their carbon emissions. The CPRS is an emissions trading scheme with a fixed price on permits for the first three years; these permits may be bought and sold at a fixed price. However, she had made a major mistake in not pointing this out and in accepting Abbott's calling the CPRS a "tax": she even used the term herself.

Was Gillard planning, or as McKew would say plotting, against Rudd before the fateful 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2010? Gillard says: "I made a decision to run for Prime Minister on the day I walked into Kevin Rudd's office and I asked him for a ballot." McKew does not believe this or that she was pushed into the PM's job at the last minute and against her will: "Gillard's forensic attention to detail sets her apart and her careful planning of every career move is legendary."

I tend to agree with McKew in doubting that Gillard was reluctantly pushed into the role of prime minister. She might have been reluctant about the timing; her preference would have been after the 2010 election but things seemed so bad to some Labor ministers they acted before the election. In retrospect that was another bad mistake. Rudd would most probably have delivered a majority Labor Government; if he then still behaved erratically he could be replaced.

Gillard blames Rudd for the disaster of the mining super-profits tax. McKew claims it was Swan and the Treasury who so misjudged the timing and form of that tax. They ignited the mining industry's

expensive and effective thrust back, when previously they and the government had agreed in principle to a different form of profits tax.

In trying to decide between McKew's and Gillard's stories it is notable that the two did not like each other from the start. McKew was posted as parliamentary secretary for early childhood education (ECE) under Gillard, as then Minister of Education. According to McKew, Gillard was condescending, authoritarian and didn't consult, and when McKew offered advice on ECE, her remit and a subject dear to her heart, Gillard ignored it. Despite all that, McKew with the state education ministers stitched together a national framework for ECE and new professional standards for early childhood teachers.

Gillard for her part damns McKew with faint praise. Whereas McKew was proud of her achievement in brokering a national framework agreed by all the state ministers, Gillard wrote that "Maxine had misread generalised support for change as specific support for a particular change"; and on losing Bennelong in 2010, "Maxine had found it hard to adjust from the adrenaline of the 2007 national-spotlight campaign to the day-to-day slog of being a marginal seat member." This is not at all how Maxine herself describes her 2010 campaign.

### **Gillard as Prime Minister**

McKew doesn't say much about Gillard's term as prime minister. In discussing the change of leadership, however, one must evaluate Gillard's performance. It is clear even from her own account that many things went wrong, and she sometimes admits it was her fault, usually in timing, not least over the changeover, asylum seeker policy and the dithering about the mining tax and climate change policy. Then there was the silly egocentricity of "the real Julia", and the vacuous "moving forward".

All that said, however, her achievements were in fact considerable. She negotiated a minority government that survived the full term despite relentless attacks from the Opposition and the press, which says a lot for her negotiating skills. That government passed important legislation, such as the CPRS, the national disability scheme, the mining tax (diluted though both these taxes had become), the Gonski education reforms and unfairness in superannuation tax. This legislative history in one term is more than Howard was able to do in three terms with majority government. Despite Tony Abbott's incessant rants to the contrary, the performance of her government was also better than the Howard Government's on inflation, interest rates, household savings, personal tax rate, company tax rate, international credit ratings foreign exchange reserves current account as a percentage of GDP, balance of trade. It was a successful government by any standards.

The problem was that her government wasn't perceived to be successful thanks to lies and vicious attacks by the Opposition, all echoed in the Murdock press. But probably even more important, her ministers didn't *explain* their policies. Rudd had real problems with the programmatic specificity needed for adequate communication and he was continually trying to undermine her; Wayne and Gillard spoke in a way that invited people to switch off; and the distraction and hectic pace of the change had placed on ministers a heavy workload. Whatever the reasons, the lack of adequate communication with the public was a grave mistake. They should have had, and deserved to have had, better PR about their work.

Climate change policy earned Gillard the sobriquet “Juliar”, jaw dropping in its hypocrisy coming from the likes of Tony Abbott. She notes that Keating and Howard changed their policies pre- and post-election many times but they were never branded John-liar or Pauliar. Likewise, Keating wasn’t called a traitor for challenging Hawke, but she was, she believes, because women aren’t supposed to challenge alpha males. She describes other sexist attacks on her in detail and they make sickening reading. She was rightly enraged but she handled the attacks with dignity, culminating in her powerful misogyny speech. Gillard repeatedly says: “I drew on my resolve”, “The same sense of purpose to drive me on” and the like, which gives the picture of a strong determined person – but I’d rather she hadn’t kept telling us this.

### **Has the ALP become dysfunctional?**

Probably more important than her views about Gillard and the “ambush”, McKew raises the wider issue of the functionality of the Labor party itself. There is the question of party discipline, of not speaking outside top-down guidelines, of doing what you are told by brash unelected minders who think it appropriate to loudly abuse you at six in the morning, of having no part in discussing ideas even in the area of your remit and supposed expertise. And you’d better come from the traditional Labor background and have allegiance to one faction or another.

If McKew’s account is even only partly true – and it is surely more than that – there seems to be little hope for the ALP as it is at present. It has lost its roots and is now a principle-free zone driven by spin and polling. The elected leaders governing the country were so craven, and/or so easily manipulated, that they did not speak out against what they later admitted to be patently wrong: deposing a popular leader in his first term as prime minister. The culture McKew describes is one of disrespect, bullying, game-playing and big-noting yourself if you want to survive. How can you represent your electorate when so hog-tied? This is not representative democracy or even any sort of democracy, for once elected you become the creature of an unelected minority. All form and no substance. That is not the way to govern a country.

A major problem for Labor is that since Hawke and Keating took neoliberal economic policy on board – which is philosophically at odds with traditional Labor values of equality and social justice – the gap between Labor and Liberal narrowed drastically. To win against the Liberals they had to outdo the Liberal Party on that party’s own home ground, which also came to include what to do about asylum seekers and that it had better be nasty. If policy is not differentiating the parties any more, personalities and presidential type leadership become paramount. Significantly, Lindsay Tanner quit Parliament soon after Rudd’s removal, not he assures us because he was on one side or the other on that issue, but because he is deeply disillusioned about them all. As he makes clear in *Sideshow*, politics as amplified by an unprincipled press becomes all about spin and entertainment, not about governing the country well. And what more entertaining than Rudd’s undermining of Gillard?

After the 2010 election, Gillard says that Rudd “brought all his formidable skills to bring me down and seize the leadership”, but “I was never going to voluntarily submit to the Labor Party being taken over by Kevin and those who had behaved so disgracefully ... to do so seemed to me a tacit endorsement that their tactics were acceptable. ... to do so would be to signal that the Labor Party was no longer a party of purpose.” Putting Rudd back into the leadership, when he was known to be unmanageable, unpredictable and arguably psychopathic, as shown particularly in the last week of the election campaign when he proposed moving Sydney’s naval facilities to Brisbane, and despite

his previous “humanitarian” stance tried to out-cruel the Coalition on asylum seeker policy. Replacing Gillard with the man already known to be a treacherous wildcard showed that the Labor Party was indeed no longer a party of purpose or of principle. They didn’t seem to know where they were going.

If good people like Maxine McKew, who are committed to Labor values, still can’t fit in with the culture of the Labor Party, and given the dysfunction of the party that emerges also from Gillard’s own account, then that Party, and Australian politics in general, are in deep, deep trouble.

### **References**

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