

Mr Rudd, Mr Popular & the Curse of the Opinion Poll

Peter Botsman

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A MORE LOVED PRIME MINISTER THAN JOHN HOWARD at Melbourne's March 2006 Commonwealth Games. The crowd simply could not get enough of him. I have never seen a PM receive such a cheer. Perhaps the crowd that night were high on something, perhaps they were cheering Melbourne's popular Lord Mayor John So or the athletes. Whatever it was it rubbed off on Howard and I am certain that this event caused Howard to lose that one last chance to go out on top. He saw he was loved and thought he could do it again. Once again popular adulation and hubris combined to cause political disaster. Eighteen months later the loved PM not only loses an election, he loses his seat. You can tell these stories again and again but leaders and PMs never learn. Kevin Rudd is an interesting juxtaposition of ability, ambition and humility. So long as the humility is there to balance out the other two traits then we will have a fair Prime Minister. However when you become Prime Minister doors open, people smile seductively even when you are a nerd, crowds cheer, schedules are made around you, people pamper and pat. If you start to do overly well in the opinion polls god help you. Anything over 45 per cent is a worry. It takes a brilliant set of individuals around a Prime Minister to keep him or her grounded and focused. Extraordinary Prime Ministers like Ben Chifley or John Curtin didn't seem to need the extra help. Events, life, challenging periods in history made them virtually ignore the perks and of office. Chifley had been so battered by the Labor Party that he didn't need any reminder of his fallibility.

Most PM's and Opposition leaders need help to remind them they are human. There is a great story about Doc Evatt in the middle of the Communist Party Dissolution Bill referendum contest. Apparently he arrived in Adelaide full of beams and arrogance so Clyde Cameron purposefully took him to an empty hall and told him no-one had turned up to hear him. The great Evatt was crest fallen. Cameron sent him off for a counter tea in the pub around the corner from his real venue. Half way through his meal Cameron said he could see crowds mingling around the corner and he would just have a look to see what was going on. He ran back to Evatt saying "Doc Doc they're waiting for you to speak". Apparently Evatt gave a great speech that night. A very good technique I thought.

Paul Keating had the support of the much under-estimated Don Russell. Russell was tough and dour with Keating's colleagues, a magnificent gate keeper, and whether Keating was up or down Russell's demeanour rarely changed. We still await the Russell chronicles, I doubt whether they will ever emerge such is the loyalty of the man. Keating had several flaws. We all do. When he got too much Mahler he believed he could fly. Like Daedalus he came crashing down to earth. But I think in the end the reason why Keating ranks so highly with those of us who are purely driven by policy and ideas was that he never suffered from the curse of being Mr. Popular. He was always working hard on a special project and each project or policy direction seemed special and important. The PMs position was a means to an end, not a personal end in itself. What more could you ask of a PM?

Kevin Rudd, like Bob Hawke, has now been cursed by opinion polls that rank him as a favorite with the general public. That means he needs a person with double Don

Russell's lightning rod abilities by his side. Thankfully Rudd has a very good lightning rod in the form of Therese Rein. But Canberra and Yarralumla are thick problems to solve. You have to fight to get out of the cloistered atmosphere and into the real world. The curse of Mr. Popular means that you inevitably become full of yourself, not a good listener, a poseur, out of touch, arrogant and aloof. It is a fatal set of ingredients for a person in the public eye in Australia. The public puts you on a pedestal and knocks you down just as fast when you don't live up to their expectations.

There are some bad signs about Kevin Rudd. He does have that fatal air of aloofness and "I wrote the speech all by myself" arrogance. When I first met the man he was absolutely unsufferable. The closest analogy would be NSW's Mad Treasurer Michael Costa or former Foreign Affairs Minister Gareth Evans or even dare I say it Mark Latham. You really wanted to take each of them outside and give them a flogging they were so rude and full of themselves. Even in this company Rudd was spectacularly arrogant and unlikeable in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He had this air that I have only ever encountered at the Department of Foreign Affairs and in some university departments. It comes from those who are removed from the day to day grind and have great power over others. It's a world where you suffer no real consequences from being ruthless and mean and so become twisted and trivial inside.

Rudd though did get his floggings. The first came with the Goss government's electoral loss in Queensland in 1995. Rudd, Director General of the Office of Cabinet, (the title says something of Rudd in this period), was dubbed "Dr. Death" and he was universally blamed for many aspects of

the Goss defeat. But this was water off a duck's back for the then arrogant Rudd. He soon popped up to contest a seat in the Federal election of 1996. Rudd received a bloody nose for his trouble and there were many in the Labor Party who were glad to see him get it. The Liberal candidate Graeme McDougall rode a 7.4 per cent swing to victory. It was only at this point that Rudd started to change. A lot of the stuffing was knocked out of him by his fellow Queenslanders. So the rest of Australia have that debt of gratitude to the banana benders.

Between 1996 and 1998 Rudd did some time in the wilderness. He must have thought he made a bad career choice in leaving the Foreign Affairs Department. There was some chance that he would not contest Griffith again and had it been a longer term between elections and had it not been for Therese Rein's encouragement, Rudd might not have successfully contested the 1998 election. He won by a marginal amount. Again though this meant that Rudd had to lose his arrogance and actually work to win people in his community support.

The task of building up support in the community was the making of Rudd. Two things came together. His knowledge of government, his erudition and the fact that he had to look back into his humble origins on the Sunshine Coast to find something to connect with ordinary people. He started to invite people to his home. His verandah became a place where the new Kevin emerged. The old Left stager Tom Uren had a saying "if you have your roots in the people you can bend with the breeze". It was the advice he gave to people who first come to parliament. Spend a lot of time getting to know your electorate, when you have their confidence, you will be able to enter the fray in Canberra with a base of

support and knowledge. When you inevitably have to bend on issues the people will trust your judgement. I don't know where in the Right Kevin Rudd learned this advice but he certainly put it into practice.

He successfully campaigned on a range of issues including against the extension of the airport runway at Brisbane which would take planes right over his electorate. The mandarin who had been party to decisions of this kind and rarely consulted now understood what it was like on the ground when governments made decisions that affected people's lives. The Rudd verandah was where the future PM had as an important education as any of his professional life.

Throughout this period many of us who knew the old Rudd were wary. I remember this certainly applied to members of the Queensland Left who detested him for the Dr Death years. But gradually people started to see that he had changed for the better. It was the kind of maturation process that Mark Latham should have been through and is a real lesson about the need for political apprenticeships for party professionals and officials. By the 2007 election Rudd had taken the ALP vote in Griffith to 53 per cent, up 9 per cent from his 1998 winning margin of 44 per cent and 12 per cent from his election losing margin of 1996.

I had my doubts about Rudd. My view is still that Labor would have won under Beazley and that Rudd would have further matured as a leader if he had some years of Ministerial experience under his belt. There is a lot of green wood in the Rudd government not least at the top.

But by the time I interviewed him in late 2006 he was clearly a changed man. His vision was of community projects that are supported by people elected to parliament. He would, he told me, hand over his seat to

the best political entrepreneur that evolves in Griffith, and not to a factional hack. He said politicians have the capacity to make changes at grass roots level and that whether you were in government or not there was much that could be done.

There is a lot to be learned from John Winston Howard's conduct in the Lodge. He lasted a very long time because he maintained a relationship with ordinary Australian people. He lived in Sydney, not in Canberra, where despite Yarralumla's position, he could still make a lightning visit to his old haunts at Earlwood and Canterbury or see the old acquaintances. Paul Keating did much of his personal growth on the job, it was painful for him to go home to Bankstown, but when he did he enjoyed it. It's just that he couldn't talk to his old neighbours about Mahler. The thing is you have to try. You have to keep that contact. You have to be a bit of a burke. You have to wear Australians unique ability to find your personal weakness and tell you about it in a joke or aside. If you don't do that, if you ever lose that ability to get down and hear what ordinary people are saying to you, you are dead as an Australian Prime Minister. It's not a popularity contest.

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