

# The Astonishing Election



**Peter Botsman**  
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How well did Labor and Kevin Rudd do in the 2013 Australian Commonwealth government election? I am astonished that the Federal Labor Party still has over 50 seats in the Federal Parliament. Anyone who is not an inner city dweller or a Canberra staffer knows that the back lash against Labor has been building for over two years. When Julia Gillard initially called the election the talk in every bush pub in the country was that they had changed the date of Clean Up Australia Day this year. The punters were waiting with baseball bats.

The media portrayal of the Rudd campaign has been beyond belief. It was a true 1950s 'we will tell you what is good for you' exercise. The Murdoch press effectively acted as a storm anchor that pulled back any positive news about Labor in any other media source. The so-called objective opinion polls would have convinced the most loyal and objective followers that Rudd and Labor had absolutely no chance of winning the election. In fact as the election coverage started even the usually reliable Antony Green was calling the election a wipe out.

The Liberal party's job was simply too easy. All that Coalition spokesmen and leader Tony Abbott had to do was agree with commentators about the inevitability of the Coalition victory. Even normally professional interviewers like Fran Kelly on the ABC's Radio National gave the Coalition spokespersons a very easy time. Everyone it seems was convinced Labor had no chance and that this would be the worst election defeat of all times,

and in the last days of the campaign there was even talk that the election result under Rudd would be similar to that expected under Prime Minister Gillard.

What seems clear is that the punters clearly did not vote for Abbott in the numbers they were predicted to. Over the next few days I expect we will see articles appearing on how, in the privacy of the electoral booth, when faced with Abbott, many could not vote for him. But what I think is also clear is that the Rudd change had an enduring effect. It clearly dissipated the angry mood against Labor. Restoring Rudd – the original Labor PM – appeased the masses.

When the change from Gillard to Rudd came about, the Coalition was initially all at sea. Labor people did dare to think they could win. The final election outcome clearly does indicate that this was indeed a possibility.

Tanya Pliberseck and Greg Combet have a hide to criticize the Rudd camp for disloyalty. Without Rudd I think even Tanya's seat, the safest Labor seat in the country, might have been vulnerable. The truth is these two are the beneficiaries of old Labor factionalism and paternalism. Both owed their positions to old power brokers and old Labor union dominance. Rudd's challenge to this and to the factionalism that installed Julia Gillard as PM was what saved Labor's sorry arse. In many ways it could be argued that they did not deserve their arse to be saved.

This is not to say that Labor and Rudd did not make major mistakes.

The first thing that Rudd failed to do was to go harder on the NSW Labor Party and the structures of power within the Federal Labor Party. Rudd has secured a new mandate for the Federal leader of the parliamentary party. Now rank and file party members will have a 50 per cent say in who is leader. But what of all the other party positions, including the party officials? What has happened to the much needed reform of party administrative positions? Party administrators should be banned from elected parliamentary office for at least six years after they resign their party positions. What has happened to the idea of rank and file pre-selections and one vote of equal value for all rank and file members of the party? What has happened to the concept of a social democratic party that moves beyond union groups like the AWU and out into new fields of power and influence including those that the Greens now clearly control and dominate.

The second point is that Labor has failed to differentiate itself from the conservatives. It is still tweedledum and tweedledee for a growing Green and independent constituency. In one way this is not a bad thing. One wonders whether the modern Labor party will ever grow the spine to develop, for example, a reasonable policy on immigration and refugees. If it can't then the next best thing is for the independents and minor parties in the Senate to force Labor and the Coalition to adopt more reasonable stances. The same is true of policies on the environment and green house. I wrote some years ago now that Labor was putting itself into a situation where it could never win office in its own right and that it would be forced to form coalitions with independents and green parliamentarians. This continues to be the case.

The third point is that Labor sentimentality is the first sign of humbug. When Labor people, including Rudd, cloak themselves in Chifley's light on the hill, when they start to say that Labor has a mortgage on schools and hospitals and disability care they are really saying we don't have any new policies, any new visions and anything new to offer those who are really struggling out in the world. There was far too much of this in the Labor campaign. Its just lazy. Moreover who needs a Labor politician to tell its own constituency about the grand legacy. It should be understood. The point is the future. As Bill Clinton etched into his most successful of modern political campaigns against George Bush Snr. – don't stop thinking and talking about tomorrow. Labor always wants to talk about its grand and glorious past.

The fourth point is that negativism is not a campaign trait that Labor should ever embrace. The professionals in the Labor machine have inherited the American disease. The most potent political campaign is the negative campaign – if you ask American campaign veterans. It will always hit its mark and cut through into people's minds. But once again to see Labor involved in negative campaigning is just a sign of laziness and failure. Hopefully people like Bruce Hawker will be moved out to pasture for a while. I look forward to the contribution of younger Labor members like Andrew Leigh in the future. They will develop permanent positive ideas campaigns and show the old guard a thing or two about how to win an election and how to survive the inevitable negatism of the coalition. The coalition is the natural negative party, not Labor or the progressives.

I hate the complacency that such negativism creates and the slack conversations about how Labor is naturally more compassionate, fair minded, egalitarian than its alternative... and how could you vote for the Coalition? People do. That is the point.

Having made these points it is simply astonishing that Labor has retained the number of seats it has in the Federal Parliament. How could this be? There is only one logical answer and that is that the leadership change from Gillard to Rudd, however imperfect, worked. It seems clear to me and it also astonishes me as I even think it, that with a better campaign, Rudd might well have won the 2013 Federal election.