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## The worst of the worst

**THERE will be a lot of argument about who was worse - Kevin Rudd or Julia Gillard. I have personally dealt with every prime minister in the last 35 years and they were the worst I have seen. On any list for the worst prime minister since Federation, both would be top contenders.**

Since both have now retired they, and their supporters, can do a kind of Battle Of The Bands to fight it out between themselves as to who is most responsible for the last six years. Gillard complains that Rudd tore her down (and he did). Rudd complains that she tore him down first. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. Gillard was never able to claim Rudd's loyalty because she never delivered loyalty to him - not when it mattered, not when the first whiff of grapeshot hit Labor in its first term of government.

Yes, Rudd was a self-absorbed ego-maniac who cared for no one's feelings so much as his own. But Labor (and Gillard) knew that all along. With Howard past his time and stumbling into the 2007 election, Labor decided to put up Rudd to inherit the spoils of victory. People who have narcissistic personalities usually get worse when they get into positions of power. Once Rudd had the power and the prestige of the prime minister's office he was unbearable. Yet Labor hooked its fortunes to Rudd. There was no point acting as if the outcome was some kind of surprise.

What should interest us now is how to reverse the damage they have done.

After six years, the government's financial position has been smashed. We used to have no debt. Now we are arguing about whether Parliament should authorise borrowings of \$400 billion or \$500 billion.

In comparison to the size of the economy the debt level is not quite as bad as it was when Keating-Labor lost office. But now there doesn't seem to be the urgency to do much about it. Labor has sapped the will of the country to do better. It has cultivated the old "she'll be right" attitude which means handing out all sorts of new benefits and leaving it to others to worry about how to pay for it in the future.

I doubt we will ever get the government finances back to where we were in 2006. I doubt that the Commonwealth will ever pay off this debt, certainly not in this decade, and probably not in our lifetimes.

Then there was the disastrous mining tax that raised no money and the carbon tax that sapped Australia's competitiveness. It's not just that Labor bungled these taxes, it's that it discredited the whole process of tax reform. Now the Coalition is pledged to make no major changes (outside the repeal of those two taxes) in this term at least. This has set back the tax reform agenda for the best part of a decade.

The issue where the government is making early progress is border protection.

Before Rudd, Australia had a system that worked, partly because of surveillance and patrols, but mostly because it had managed to convince the smugglers that whatever tactics they tried the government would respond and defeat them. Labor abolished that system in the name of being more "humane". The smugglers and their passengers understood that to mean the door was open again. And they responded.

No matter how many times Labor said it wanted to stop the "vile trade", it continued because the smugglers concluded Labor did not have the will to stop it. They were right. And now they want to see if things are different under the new government. They are testing to see if the new government, and the new minister, Scott Morrison, have the will to make good on their promise to stop the boats. Make no mistake. Neither the government nor Morrison intends to walk away from this issue.

Morrison has his critics. Labor does not want him to succeed. That would just show how irresponsible and weak successive Labor ministers were when they promised tough action that came to nothing. Labor wants to prove that no one can get back to the situation that prevailed before Rudd intervened to dismantle it.

A large portion of the media - led by Fairfax and the ABC - wants Morrison to fail. It advocated the changes that Rudd introduced. When the system led to a surge in arrivals and terrible losses at sea the media justified themselves on the grounds that since nothing can be done no one is responsible for the disaster.

These groups will attack the government and the minister relentlessly. But in a funny kind of way that will help. If Morrison can show that he is not diverted by the pressure of the media and the Opposition and the legal lobby that derives its income from this business, then he will prove that things really have changed and the government now has the will to stop this vile trade. Early results show a 75 per cent drop in arrivals. It is much more than I, for one, expected.

Morrison is giving every sign he is serious. It appears that some of the smugglers are finding that convincing. Time will tell. But if the smugglers and their passengers conclude that a boat arrival is less likely to be successful than an application for a refugee or humanitarian visa Morrison will have succeeded in his mission.

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