

Good old Bill's just a guy who gets things done



Peter Costello



LOYALTY VACUUM

He might have helped bring down two prime ministers but that won't harm Bill Shorten in today's Labor Party

IS THERE, Bill Shorten, any question that Julia Gillard will be prime minister heading into the election?"

"No."
"Will you review your support for her?"

"No."
Five days later: "I will be supporting Kevin Rudd tonight."

How do they do it? For months Shorten was pledging his uber loyalty to Gillard. He was out there on a daily basis and, towards the end, making hourly pledges of support.

Any talk of a campaign against her was, he said, a media beat-up. And she had no more loyal backer than him.

Well, it turned out Gillard had 45 more loyal backers than him. They were the ones who voted for her. In an announcement designed to inflict maximum damage, Shorten rattled from her ship half an hour before the ballot. He told the world he was supporting Kevin Rudd.

And that was the end of Gillard's career.

Mind you, Shorten and other Labor factional chiefs had previously torn down Rudd to install Gillard in the middle of the

night in June 2010. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to execute one leader looks like misfortune but to execute two starts to look like carelessness.

There are those who say that two-faced behaviour like this has ended any hope Shorten ever had of leading the Labor Party. They are wrong. He has not damaged his prospects — not in the slightest.

Those critics show no understanding of the nature of the modern Australian Labor Party.

Let us consider how the past two Labor leaders got the job. Gillard was the deputy to Rudd. She professed to be greatly offended when Rudd started taking soundings from the party about her loyalty.

She regarded herself as the very model of a good deputy. How could he doubt her integrity like that? She was so incensed by Rudd's behaviour that she teamed up with Labor's factional chiefs and deposed him. Which shows Rudd was absolutely right to be taking soundings on her loyalty, and his real mistake was not to take them earlier.

Rudd didn't accept his political assassination. He did what he could to sabotage Gillard in the

2010 election. He challenged her for the leadership in February last year. He tried again but lost his nerve in March this year.

Then he pledged his undying love and loyalty: "Julia Gillard has my 100 per cent support."

He added: "There are no circumstances under which I will return to the leadership of the Labor Party."

Well, there was one circumstance — the chance to win a caucus ballot, an opportunity that opened up two weeks ago. As soon as he saw it, he took it.

For his destabilising conduct and double-dealing, Rudd has been crowned with the Labor leadership.

Any ambitious Labor MP can see that disloyalty is no disqualification for that job. The suggestion that it will bar Bill Shorten is as wide of the mark as it is possible to get.

On the contrary, showing an ability to mislead the press, the public and then turn on a leader is virtually a job application.

Under current political rules loyalty is viewed as weakness, honesty is viewed as naivety and principle is regarded as inflexibility. To dissemble and

deceive before striking is to show the qualities that the press admires and politics rewards.

There is only one rule about getting the leadership of a political party — that is to get there. How it is done is completely irrelevant after that.

THE old school of politics, which I used to belong to, thought it was all about policy and ideas. In a ballot I always thought it was relevant to know what a candidate's policy commitments were because it indicated what they might do — where they wanted to take the country.

But no one has suggested that the Gillard v Rudd v Gillard ballots had anything to do with policy. When Gillard struck at Rudd he warned that the party risked "a lurch to the Right" on border protection — that Gillard would adopt tougher policies to stop the boats.

Now that he has deposed her he is frantically making a lurch to the even-further-Right.

Rudd used to pledge himself as an "economic conservative". Now he thinks that balancing the Budget is misguided "European

austerity". Having thought out views on issues such as this and sticking to them might indicate a bit of principle but, in modern politics, that is regarded as "inflexibility".

A modern politician should always be ready to turn on the head of a coin. That is thought to be "smart politics" and shows a brilliant capacity to outflank opponents. Having total flexibility puts a premium on being a policy vacuum. And that has been no better illustrated than by Shorten himself. When asked last year about his view on a political issue he said he agreed with his prime minister (Gillard) and said: "I haven't seen what she said but let me say I support what it is that she said."

Get it? No real policy views gives an unfettered ability to adopt whatever happens to be convenient and no real loyalty gives complete flexibility to dispose of whoever happens to be an electoral liability.

You think this disqualifies someone from leadership? You haven't been watching.

Peter Costello is a *Herald Sun* columnist and a former federal treasurer