

# Convictions muddied in the middle



**T**he reason Kevin Rudd looms large in this campaign is Julia Gillard wants to make herself a small target. Gillard has been Prime Minister for seven weeks. Before that, she had a short ministerial career totalling 2½ years. The public does not know her. In the leaders' debate she named her greatest reform as introducing a schools website. People want to know what she stands for.

Gillard was offered the Labor leadership after polling told the factional chiefs the public wanted tougher action on border protection and softer action on climate change. She was happy to oblige. She had no problem walking away from previous positions. Gillard is a career politician. She has a robotic ability to repeat slogans that are tested in focus groups to avoid any negative reaction. When she called the election she mentioned "moving forward" or variations thereof more than 20 times in 30 minutes.

Gillard neutralised Labor's problems by embracing positions held by the Coalition. The Coalition neutralised its problems by moving towards Labor. We have look-a-like policies from a Labor leader who hails from its left and a Liberal leader from its right.

Gillard tells us she has a fair bit of agreement with Tony Abbott on boat arrivals, which would surprise him and certainly astound anyone in the last Coalition government, which was pilloried for a policy apparently now accepted by both sides of politics.

Abbott does not support statutory contracts in the workplace and will keep the Rudd/Gillard re-regulation of industrial relations, even though it takes us back beyond the days of the last Labor government. Both leaders support cutting immigration during a time of low unemployment and an unprecedented mining boom.

The Coalition does not support an emissions trading system and nor does Labor, unless 150 people randomly selected from the phone book say it is OK.

Both parties announced minor cuts to company tax. Both pledge to get the budget back into balance. Of course, just because they say these things does not mean they will deliver. The best predictor of future performance is the past record.

So let's look at the leaders' core beliefs. No two leaders started further apart. Both began in student politics when many within it supported the communist left. Gillard was part of that movement. Abbott was not. Gillard was in favour of women's liberation, gay liberation and the environment. Abbott was anti-communist, a supporter of Catholic moral teaching and a strong supporter of mining.

No issue then divided the student movement more than Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Abbott supported Israel along with most of the Labor Right, the Liberals and the DLP. The student left did not.

A curious piece in the *Australian Jewish News* last week reported how Gillard was once described as a "Zionist" in her student days. The description did not meet with her approval. She threatened to sue for defamation. In those days, being pro-Israel could destroy a career in the student left.

In June last year, Gillard and I each gave speeches to the Australia-Israel Leadership Dialogue held at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. I reminisced about my time fighting the student left over Israel. Gillard read a speech written to emphasise her current support for Israel. There was no mention of her previous disgust at being called a Zionist. She was a politician telling the audience what it wanted to hear. I was impressed by her dexterity.

Which brings me back to the election. Are these leaders really in agreement or are they just pretending so they can get into office and put their convictions into practice?

The most endearing thing about Abbott is that he does believe in a few things. He has convictions. I used to think Gillard believed in the things that turned her into a left-wing student activist, and if she had a chance she would act on them. But I am having doubts.

It is possible she adopted those left-wing policies then to get elected, just as she has adopted border protection now. It is possible she never believed in those left-wing causes either.

So the good news is she may not be a rabid left-winger as prime minister. The depressing news is she doesn't believe in much besides getting elected. That could explain why she is happy to delegate climate policy to people selected from the phone book. They might have a clearer idea of where the country should be heading.

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