

Mud doesn't stick on faceless men

After Deng Xiaoping stood down from his official positions in the Communist Party and the government of China he was still widely regarded as the paramount leader and ruler of the country. The only official position he held was honorary chairman of the China Bridge Association. It gave rise to a lot of humour: "Why bother with politics when the real position of influence is running the card game?"

There was reason to respect his power and his reach. Deng was the great moderniser of China. He deserves the credit for its economic rise.

In Australia we have people who imagine themselves as latter day Dengs – who hold no office but boast that they can make and break party leaders and governments. These are the people the press describe as the "faceless men" [although we are getting heartily sick of seeing their faces these days], factional warlords, or "party powerbrokers".

The way to become a powerbroker is to spend an inordinate amount of time on internal party ballots. It doesn't matter that these ballots relate to non-positions of no influence. A powerbroker must engage in ceaseless activity. This shows everyone how important they are. It helps to have a union or followers who provide the factional boss with some bragging rights. But the most important

skill of all is to cultivate good relations with the media.

The media is always looking for a story. When it is in the interest of the party leadership or the parliamentary team to clam up and stifle a story, the media still needs people who claim to know the inside story. And for this they turn to the party powerbroker. The journalist needs to show he is well connected. The source needs to build up his relevance. Both have an interest in maintaining the aura of power. This gives the opportunity to powerbrokers to operate in the shadows of both sides of politics.

It has always amazed me that the right wing operatives of the NSW branch of the Labor Party get such a soft run in the mainstream media. This is a group that brought the public the most incompetent state government in modern memory – from Carr to Iemma to Rees to Keneally. Outside their little fiefdom, where loyalty is rewarded with patronage, most of them would be unemployable. So what are they good at?

They are good at leaking and briefing the press. And in return the press protects them from the kind of scrutiny and exposure their incompetence would otherwise bring. This is the mob that thought they were so clever to bring down Kevin Rudd and



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install a plainly ill-equipped Julia Gillard in the Labor leadership. In that case one of their number – the union leader Paul Howes – gave a running television commentary of events so he and his group could claim credit for the assassination.

Think how much we now owe them. Without their efforts we would not have the government we have had for the past 15 months. This group is well on its way in doing to Australia what it managed to do to NSW.

So it was amusing to read in the press last week that the NSW Labor Party boss Sam Dastyari "is believed to have softened his support for Julia Gillard" and "powerbrokers within the ALP's Right faction concede some of their MPs are wavering in their support for Julia Gillard". What this means is that the powerbrokers and

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press-briefers are getting ready to protect their own reputations now they have given up protecting Gillard's. There is nothing worse than being a powerbroker who has no power. So if Gillard is going down then the powerbrokers need to get off her bandwagon and take credit for her demise as much as they took credit for her ascension.

That is why the powerbroker prefers the shadows to the bright light. In the shadows you can maintain the illusion that you are fully in control, responsible for every success and accountable for no failure. Once you step into the full light, becoming, say, a minister where you can actually be assessed on your record, the facade falls away.

And that is the other great thing about being a powerbroker. When things work out badly it is the person in the spotlight who takes the odium.

You can move on to your next great strategic manoeuvre. Being a powerbroker means never having to say you are sorry.

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