

# Rudd the one-man band was out of tune



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**I**n a moment of defiance the night before he lost his job, Kevin Rudd declared: "I was elected by the people of Australia to do a job. I was not elected by the factional leaders of the Labor Party." It was his last spectacular misjudgment as prime minister.

The next morning demonstrated the truth. The factional leaders took his office away. He didn't even contest it. Since then journalists have had Shorten, Conroy, Arbib, Feehey and Colining up to demand credit for their nice piece of handiwork.

We talk of the "Rudd government" or the "Howard government" as if the public votes directly for a particular prime minister. In truth they vote for a political party represented by a local member. MPs decide who will be their leader and therefore prime minister. In the case of Labor, the factional

leaders decide on behalf of MPs.

Kevin Rudd was installed a year before the last election. Labor strategists wanted to avoid a contest between Liberal and Labor, between the Coalition's record and Labor's, between the Coalition team and Labor's. They marketed a product called Kevin '07 (new leadership, fresh ideas) against an ageing Howard. Rudd was preferred prime minister. He still was this year. But Kevin '07 had outlived its usefulness.

A leadership switch before an election is now standard Labor practice. In Queensland it was to Anna Bligh (successful), NSW to Morris Iemma (successful), Victoria to John Brumby (wait and see), Tasmania to David Bartlett (successful), Western Australia to Alan Carpenter (unsuccessful) and the Northern Territory to Paul Henderson (successful). The Gillard switch was not done entirely behind closed doors as was mostly the case at state level. But in the end Rudd went quietly.

A leadership switch gives a government the chance to bury its mistakes. In this case the idea is not just to bury the mistakes of Rudd—the mining tax, the insulation batts, the blowout in the deficit—but to bury Rudd himself.

It is extraordinary that having been the leader, having announced he is standing for re-election, having asked for a position, Rudd is now refused an appointment to Labor's frontbench. He is not in Labor's top 20.

It illustrates how touchy the current cabinet is about the record of the last two years. We know Gillard and Wayne Swan supported the resource super profits tax, the wasteful spending on insulation batts and school halls, and softening border protection. But they are so keen to distance themselves, they have loaded all the policies into Rudd's

basket and buried him with them.

Any keen reader of weekend papers would have noticed how many stories there were to the effect Rudd was a one-man band. Kevin '07 is Kevin 0'zero: a loner who consulted no one and listened to no one. Unless he is made solely to blame, there will be collective responsibility shared around to people who do not want to be accountable.

So the Prime Minister has dropped the resource tax. Now she will stop the boats. Last financial year we had a record number of unauthorised boat arrivals (5600) so there is a problem. But who was responsible? It is hard to blame the previous government because Labor says it was too harsh on unauthorised arrivals. It cannot be the fault of the current Immigration Minister because he is still in his post. No fault can be ascribed to the Deputy Prime Minister—then or now. So it must have been... Kevin Rudd. It is obvious why Rudd cannot be brought back into cabinet.

When the public first saw Rudd they liked him. He was not Howard so he could freshen up and modernise things without being too radical. After three years they realised it was not enough that Rudd was not someone else; he had to be someone himself with views, commitments and values. The public began to worry about what they were.

Now we are told Gillard is not Rudd. Although she stood shoulder to shoulder with him, she dislikes the mining tax, unauthorised boat arrivals, etc. She will get a grace period. But she has a past and it will catch up—especially the schools spending. She too has a shelf life. She must get to an election before it expires. Mistakes can catch up very suddenly. Just ask Kevin Rudd.

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