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Permanent Dysfunctionalism: Australia's Leadership Disease

By Binoy Kampmark

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Removing a first-term incumbent leader should have been taboo after the turmoil that followed Labor's decision to make such a move against Kevin Rudd.

It should give much pause for lamentation. Journalists, pundits, and the public sitting on the sidelines awaiting the vote of party members in a room may result in: a ritually symbolic decapitation of an Australian Prime Minister, or an unstable, and uncertain dispensation offered by the good grace of a positive ballot. This is what prompted the Coalition party room this morning in Canberra, in what is termed in the local lingo a “leadership spill”. The incumbent leader, Prime Minister Tony Abbott, won it 61-39.

Australia has been a country caught by a condition that can only be termed a permanent, or at the very least a long term, form of leadership dysfunctionism. It started at the State level. Incumbent premiers lost their head before heading to the next election, ambushed by their party colleagues. It used to be said to be a typically Labor party phenomenon, till the Liberals did it to such figures as the Victorian Premier Ted Ballieu.

The disease has well and truly headed up the tree trunk of Australian politics. For six years, the electorate bore witness to what seemed to be caretaker prime ministers awaiting party room assassination. The Australian Labor Party's Kevin Rudd, who came to power in an exuberant manner in 2007, was dumped in an engineered knifing by followers of Julia Gillard, who had been his deputy. The favour was returned, with blows, and threats, exchanged through the course of each of their prime ministerships. The polls, not the policies, were dictating each treacherous slice, thrust and slaying, with the party machine orchestrating the summary executions. Instead of resembling a nominal democracy, Australia began to, perhaps more honestly, resemble a ramshackle plutocracy run by fickle agendas.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, the conservative successor to the ALP self-harming generation, was always an aberration of sorts, an unpopular leader who won because his opponents opposite him were generally suicidal in terms of their political careers, the short changers of their own destiny. He campaigned well, not so much in poesy as gritty, gloomy reminders, made bearable by the spectre of the Rudd-Gillard seppuku run.

This enabled him to take the spoils, charging in with the standard, anachronistic myths of the sacred country besieged by crisis. Muscular and macho, his jarring sound bites proved effective, a sort of ghastly program on a loop: an economic "emergency" was afflicting Australia; the "turning back of the boats" to save Australia from asylum seekers was needed; stable government needed to return.

That there was no such economic crisis; that asylum seekers were entitled to seek asylum, by boat, even in Australia, was irrelevant. The ALP spinners were out of thread, largely because they found their own approaches being appropriated by the Coalition with greater conviction.

But Abbott, a hard faction figure who was instrumental in stomping and trampling on any vaguely progressive streak in his own party, was going to eventually worry those within government. First, argues shareholder campaigner Stephen Mayne, there was the issue of convenience and expediency. "The Cabinet is best placed to pass judgment on Abbott and they know better than anyone that he was never fit to be PM and cannot possibly lead the Liberals to the next election."

Since the election victory in September 2013, Abbott has simply affirmed what he always was. He is an avid monarchist, to the point of parody – witness his granting of an Australian version of a knighthood to Prince Philip. He is provincially stingy and mean-spirited in his concept of welfare – his obsession with seeking a co-payment from patients visiting their general practitioner being a case in point. He is insufferably obsequious when it comes to the US-Australian alliance, which doubles up as an Anglophone wet dream in search of a purpose, usually a military one.

The story, however, goes deeper than that. This is a government that is not working. The detention centres remain riddled with problems, however many boats the government claims to have stopped. The shock budget remains severed and retarded, stymied by government defeats in the Senate. Abbott has gone to so far as to ditch that bug bear of the ultra-conservative wing his party – the paid parental leave scheme.

There is, however, another role that requires mentioning: the dark, Iago-like presence of advisors who have become the parasites of the political classes. Australian politics, not exceptionally, has become the field, not of the elected, but the unelected pollsters and advisors. Added to the fact that party members, not the Australian voter, have first say over who is Prime Minister, and you have Westminster's grand toxic game at play.

Their role has been instrumental in undermining Australian leaders in the modern era of politics. Gillard was told to be "the real Julia," a cathartic harking back to the realm of authentic politics. The previous one had been, evidently, a fraudulent creation, confetti from the faction machine. Rudd was encouraged to drink beer at the local gaming pub, a situation palpably absurd for a person who distinctly loathed anything connected with the public.

Abbott has had to contend with his chief of staff, Peta Credlin, in a manner similar to US President George Bush's association with Karl Rove, termed the "brain" of that presidency. Credlin has assumed the air of the untouchable, becoming the equivalent of *The Thick of It's* Malcolm Tucker, presumably without Armando Iannucci's crafted lines. Miranda Devine, conservative columnist, and occasional Rupert Murdoch mouthpiece, fumed at the veneration of Credlin by Coalition supporters, who, it was claimed, had been indispensable to them winning in 2013. "Is Abbott really so desperate to hang on to his chief of staff that he would debase himself so?"[1]

Public relations and poll metrics, not policy, tends to come first. The media runs on this in typical fashion. "The latest Newspoll, taken exclusively for *The Australian*, shows the Coalition's primary vote down three points to an eight-month low of 35 per cent. Labor is up two points to 41 per cent" (*Herald Sun*, Feb 9).

The policy becomes the mirror of fear in response to what the public might do – and here, the public is the hypothetical juju man. The result is that political leaders do not lead but are led, strung along by assumptions and the fear of party members. The instinct of survival, one attained at all costs, puts pay to any decency, let alone effectiveness, of policy. When Westminster met the public relations machine, it ceased to be a viably representative political system – if it ever was. The only thing left for Abbott is to insist that his government not behave like the previous ones, though the disaffected behind this vote will not go away. The ship is holed, and is sinking.