

## **Fascinating contest could go either way**

By Noel Pearson

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Janet Albrechtsen's assessment last week that John Howard has done his dash, can't win the next election and should hand the baton to Peter Costello, shows that, although she has been a stalwart cultural warrior of the Right, you could never rely on her in a political knife-fight.

Albrechtsen's comments were unhelpful to her conservative fellow travelers, and also politically naïve. Howard would not so much be handing Costello a baton as a hospital pass. The question of who will take the Coalition into the next election was decided a long time ago.

This is turning out to be the most fascinating election since Paul Keating's sweetest victory of all, in 1993, when the unlosable election was indeed lost by John Hewson. Whether it turns out like 1996, when the tide just receded on the 13 year old Labor supremacy, or whether Howard can conjure the necessary lunar alignments and turn the tide is not a foregone conclusion. Howard says that he can still lead his party to victory. I think someone in his position can.

Politics is filled with possibilities. The universe of possible directions for political strategy includes the entire compass, all 360 degrees of it. Many positions on the compass will yield nothing for a political strategy, and many will be detrimental. But somewhere among all the possible directions lies the one that will yield success. The challenge for politicians is to find that point on the compass.

When a political leader's stocks are on the rise, as Kevin Rudd's are, there are more points of the compass that will yield success.

However, when stocks are on the wane, then the number of points that can yield success decreases and the danger points increase.

The point is that there is never no direction that will work. The challenge for political leaders is to find it. And on finding that direction, to be willing to follow it. And it ain't over 'til the fat lady sings.

No political leader is capable of seeing, let alone exploring, all 360 possible degrees. It is in the nature of humans to not possess the full range of flexibility. Great political leaders are distinguished by their possession of a larger than average range of possible movement.

In most situations leaders operating within a limited range succeed because the winning directions lie within that range. The challenge is one of accurate calibration and competent execution. But when the old directions start to fail, then a larger intellectual and political imagination is required.

That there is always a direction that will lead to success is a truth more in theory than in reality. This is because, in practice, most people are unable to find and follow the right direction if it lies outside their natural range.

For every person, some issues are political, some are ideological and some are personal. For Rudd, global warming is political but for his environment spokesman, Peter Garrett, it is ideological. Industrial relations for many of his team is ideological, but for Rudd it is political: malleable or disposable according to tactical and strategic considerations.

For Howard, deregulated labour markets are an ideological issue, the environment is political and euthanasia is personal. For Tony Abbott the constitutional monarchy is ideological whereas for Howard it is probably personal. And so on.

I give these examples only to make the point that whether particular issues are a matter of politics, ideology or personal fidelity determines whether a leader is prepared to look in a direction outside their normal and proven range. Ideology and personal belief and attachment are a large constraint on everyone's capacity to be flexible. We are only human, after all, and not everything is simply a matter of politics.

Rudd's great strength is his political pragmatism. He harbours many personal convictions but it is hard for me to say definitively what is a matter of ideology for him. He has a good talent for disguising it in any case.

This is not to say that pragmatism without ideals or convictions is beautiful in leadership. Far from it. In a battle context, however, a leader's capacity to subject irrational personal convictions and ideological preferences to critical re-examination determines whether they will be able to see the elusive path to victory and orient their strategy accordingly. Or that's the theory.

Kerry O'Brien's relentless probing, on The 7.30 Report, of the meaning of the meeting at Quay Grand Hotel, extracted from the Prime Minister the commitment that he would serve the next term in order to complete important items on his agenda.

He indicated he would then hand over to his successor, who he assumes would be Peter Costello. This change from Howard's established formula was inelegantly expressed, but it is now out there.

The dangers of this new position are obvious and were immediately pursued by the nation's most eminent and underpaid of silks, O'Brien. First, is the electorate now being asked to elect two prime ministers? Second, are the constituents of Bennelong going to be forced to a by-election before the end of the next term?

Rudd didn't even allow time for the closing credits of The 7.30 Report to finish rolling before he was pressing the untenability of Howard's new formula.

I thought at the time of the last election that the scratch lottery ticket of Costello emerging from behind Howard was never going to work for Labor. Painting Costello as a negative did not work in 2004; there is no reason to believe it will work in 2007.

For Howard at this juncture, the plan to make the transition to Costello is a solution, not a problem. The more fundamental question for Howard is, of course: why should Australian electors give him another run and what unfinished business is of such profound importance that it requires his leadership as opposed to that of his opponent, Rudd, or his presumed successor, Costello?

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