

## Maginot Line protects Tony Abbott from leftist snipings of 'love media'

CHRIS KENNY THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 05, 2013 12:00AM

**IN political battles, like any other, it is always an advantage to know from which direction you will be attacked.**

In our national debate Tony Abbott needs a Maginot Line only on his left flank. Seldom do the mainstream critics skirt around to snipe from the right.

The ingrained anti-conservative tendencies in much of the media have enabled Abbott comfortably to rise above expectations. And the Coalition also escapes some of the serious scrutiny it deserves.

This is because most political commentators, especially from the Canberra press gallery, seem incapable of critiquing from anything other than a left-of-centre perspective. They take their cues from the debating points and political gibes of Labor, which at this stage of the cycle is so deeply in denial about its predicament that it doesn't offer plausible critiques.

Labor MPs criticising the government's early efforts on border protection or fiscal management do so from such a flimsy footing that they would be better holding their silence.

In these early days the greatest vulnerabilities in the Coalition's policy prescription can be seen from a pragmatic or right-of-centre vantage point.

If we look at some of the major ongoing issues we can see how this unfolds.

On border protection the Labor attacks, eagerly amplified and endorsed by media supplicants, have long been hysterical. In June, as prime minister, Kevin Rudd went so far as to suggest Abbott's policies would lead to "some sort of conflict with Indonesia".

This was absurd and irresponsible yet reflected a view held by many on the progressive left that somehow Abbott's policies are unwise, unworkable and unacceptable. This is a difficult position to comprehend when you consider Abbott's prescription, essentially, is to return to the policies that worked in the Howard years (when our relationship with Indonesia reached a high point).

Still, this attitude has long framed the gallery's coverage of the issue.

While Abbott has remained consistently beholden to a proven policy formula, Labor has held virtually every conceivable position, from promising to turn back boats to dismantling strong border measures, from denying there was a problem to blaming the influx on external factors, and from decrying offshore processing to embracing offshore processing.

There is simply no evidence that Abbott's approach is anything but comprehensive or that Labor's record has been anything but abysmal. Yet the critique, driven by the gallery, the ABC and Fairfax (the love media), has focused on how Abbott would make a mess of it all.

This silliness might have made life tough for Abbott in opposition but this week his forbearance was rewarded. When he visited Jakarta his solid performance was able to soar above the stupendously low expectations.

He did no more than he promised or should have been expected to do, cloaking his policies in the language of government diplomacy rather than opposition rhetoric. But that was enough to force many commentators to admit he had surpassed their estimations, prompting others to justify their own forecasts by confecting some sort of backdown.

To be sure, stopping the people-smuggling trade again will be a complex task.

Even with some occasional overreach (Scott Morrison's ill-advised campaign comments about people-smuggling disruption operations) and sharp responses from Jakarta, the signs have long been there for a solid relationship between Abbott and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

The Indonesian President hosted Abbott in Jakarta as opposition leader in October last year. This was an important gesture from Yudhoyono, especially given the fraught politics over border protection in Canberra.

The jaundiced disposition of the commentariat meant its significance was largely overlooked, which helped to generate the sense of a diplomatic coup by Abbott this week.

But that's not the love media's only accidental favour for Abbott. In other policy areas there are weaknesses that go largely unprodded.

On climate change, the Coalition has successfully prosecuted the argument that, aside from breaking a promise, the carbon tax burdened industry by getting too far ahead of the rest of the world on pricing carbon.

Yet the routine attack from the Left simply portrays Abbott as a "denier" and questions the Coalition's commitment to carbon emissions reductions.

The more pertinent attack would focus on the wisdom of spending billions of dollars on meeting a bipartisan 5 per cent emissions reduction target when there is a lack of action globally.

And certainly if funds are spent abating carbon through direct action, then a price of sorts is being placed on CO<sub>2</sub>. This de facto price increases when you factor in the additional costs of renewable energy targets and other clean-energy subsidies.

The questions that need to be asked centre on why taxpayers should pay for these schemes when there can be no discernible impact on global climate.

We need to examine whether taxpayers' money is being frittered away on political gestures and whether the money might be better

spent on adaptation or research.

But because these questions won't be asked by the Left, they seldom get an airing, except on the political fringes or by the so-called shock jocks.

Likewise the attacks on Abbott's costly paid parental leave plan have been misguided.

Driven by the lazy politics of envy, Labor has attacked this scheme on equity grounds. The refrain asks why highly paid women should receive more on maternity leave than lower paid workers.

Given Abbott is framing the initiative as a workplace entitlement, this attack has underscored his point, and helped him win unlikely support from feminists such as Eva Cox.

The equity argument is also fundamentally flawed because imbalances already exist. Women in the public service receive much more generous entitlements than most privately employed women - with up to 14 weeks paid at full wages.

So the Abbott scheme would actually eliminate inequities, giving all women 26 weeks pay at their own wage, up to the upper limit of \$150,000 a year.

A plausible attack on this scheme would decry it as an unjustified expansion of the welfare state, imposing higher taxes for this entitlement.

The trouble is, by logical extension, this is an argument against any government-funded parental leave scheme.

And few politicians would want to touch that case.

But there is the issue of affordability. At a time of structural budget deficits, rising government debt and low economic growth, this is not the time to increase entitlements or the taxes to fund them.

This is a strong argument. But it won't be run by Labor because it requires the tacit admission that Abbott's is a better and more equitable scheme; just not affordable for now.

No matter how sensible this is, it is an uncomfortable line for the love media to run.

And so for the foreseeable future, Abbott can rely on his Maginot Line.

The critics will gather on his left flank shouting that it is impossible to stop the boats, helping to make him look like a genius if he does.

And they'll attack his climate and parental leave policies only from ideological rather than practical positions, helping Abbott to consolidate himself, uncontested, on the middle ground.

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