

Eating Kevin Rudd alive

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Mark Latham

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Dear Diary,

Who would have thought? When I published these pages four years ago, I expected them to have a short shelf-life. Now I have people coming up to me on the street saying: "You were right about Rudd - we thought your book was over the top, but now we know that's what he's really like."

It's the curse of Cassandra: proved right but too late in the scene. I had the answer about Heavie Kevvie before the public were even asking the question.

When it comes to O and A, the Rudds are phenomenal.

Last weekend, Greg Rudd wrote a newspaper article giving his brother a tickle-up, expressed in the weirdest way possible. He asked 40 questions then proceeded to answer each of them, scattergun style.

It must run in the family. That's the way Kevin talks: an endless stream of rhetorical Q and A.

Nambour must have been fun in the 1960s. The Rudd kids returning home each afternoon and saying, "So, how did I go at school today?" and then talking until dinner-time - a house full of little Castros.

It's like the old caucus joke: Kevin prattles on for 30 minutes with one of the colleagues then says, "Well, I've said enough on that subject, what do you think about me?"

So let me ask a few questions. Isn't everyone glad Rudd held his 2020 summit two years ago? That's when Labor had just been through an election campaign and the only thing they had to say on tax was to rubber stamp Howard's policy.

Rudd and Wayne Swan hadn't done the policy work (too busy studying focus group reports and practising their media grabs) so they embraced the idea of a "root and branch" tax review.

Rudd loves to commission reports. In government, it's the equivalent of his O and A routine. "What do I think about tax policy? Better set up a review." "What do I think about health? I need someone to write a report for me."

When the spin doctors and poll junkies took over the party, Labor's policy culture collapsed. Rudd's O and A is all they have left.

Now even this house of cards is falling in.

Twelve months ago, I thought Rudd's populist style would not catch up with him until his second term in office. Then in December (when Tony Abbott became Opposition Leader) I assumed he would call a double dissolution on climate change and smash the Coalition.

The biggest question of all: how did it go so wrong?

Hubris in one answer: Rudd thought he was having a permanent love affair with the Australian people and, no matter when he called the election, he would romp in. Mark Arbib and Karl Bitar told him not to go early and he was foolish enough to listen to them.

This is the problem with the NSW Right: they can tell you what the focus groups said last night, but they have no idea about political trends six months from now.

Meanwhile, little Swannie was recoiling with horror at the recommendations of the Henry review, such as a universal land tax and other electoral poison.

He wanted to junk the whole thing, but with Abbott gaining traction with his "all talk, no action" line, the government had to be seen to be doing something.

So they binned over a hundred of Henry's recommendations and adopted the three they thought they could get away with politically: bash the foreign-owned mining companies (a standard fallback for populist politicians) and put the proceeds of the new mining tax into superannuation (working families) and a lower company tax rate (a morsel to appease the business sector).

Didn't that work well? Instead of having an election in March on climate change, an issue that tears the Coalition apart, the government is now poised to have one on tax, one of the Coalition's traditional strengths.

As Robert McClelland has always said, the electorate marks left-of-centre parties harder on economic issues because they associate them with wasteful tax-and-spend policies.

Labor has reignited this perception with its disastrous home insulation and school building programs. The last thing they need is a tax debate.

Rudd must hate it: the leadership speculation, mongrel backbenchers backgrounding the media, his big slide in the polls - the got-to-be-loved syndrome" gone sour. It's eating him alive. No question about that.

Mark Latham is a former Labor leader and author of The Latham Diaries.