

“I’M NOT TRYING TO WIN A BEAUTY CONTEST”

With a federal election due by November 30, opposition leader and alternative prime minister Tony Abbott tells Rolling Stone why Australians should give him the top job...

BY GUY MOSEL

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HE COALITION SITS ON THE CUSP OF RETURNING TO POWER FOR THE first time since 2007, the end of the Howard era. Polling data gives them a significant election-winning lead, and unless Labor can pull out a proverbial rabbit in the next nine months, few pundits give Julia Gillard’s team a chance. // But then there’s the Tony Abbott factor. Depending on who you talk to, Abbott is either a savvy politician and a man of principle, or a drearily pessimistic naysayer who’ll do and say anything to get into the Lodge. His personal polling is plunging historical depths, indicating that for all his effectiveness at damaging the government, Abbott remains an unlikeable public figure. Will that matter come election time, or will the Labor negatives he’s so ruthlessly exploited outweigh the personal distaste many in the electorate feel towards him?



Abbott: “I think I can make a difference”

ROLLING STONE sat down with Mr Abbott in his Phillip Street, Sydney, offices just before Christmas, at the end of arguably the most spiteful parliamentary year in living memory. He asked us to call him "Tony".

Why do you want to be prime minister?

I think I can make a difference, I think I can help to guide change for the better. And in a nutshell I think only the Coalition at this time can make the changes needed for a strong and prosperous economy for a safe and secure Australia.

You don't think Labor's been doing that?

[Shakes his head] Nope. I am only too happy to concede that previous Labor governments have put substantial reforms in place. For instance the Hawke/Keating government was responsible for financial deregulation, tariff cuts, the beginnings of privatisation and a certain amount of labour market reform. Admittedly they did that with the support of the then opposition. But the current Labor government has been, in my opinion, the worst government in our history. It's taken our country backwards. Almost everything the government talks about as a reform is utterly unworthy of the name, because reforms are about making our country more efficient, about bringing our people together, not dividing people. I'm not saying there aren't decent people inside the Labor Party but I think this government has been almost entirely wrong-headed in the approach to the economy.

You talk about the economy and prosperity – isn't it hard to argue that Labor has been doing a bad job when we're the best performing country in the world over the past five years?

I don't think too many people who are out there in the real world – people trying to run a small business, people leaving school and uni and trying to get a job, people trying to get approvals to start a new development – think that the economy is anything other than flat to weak. Second point: such strength as we've got owes almost everything to the reforms of the previous two governments and nothing to the spending spree of the current government.

Many have accused the opposition of being long on criticism and short on policy. What do you say to that?

Well, just about all the policy we took to the last election remains our policy, and you might have seen this book that we brought out in the last week of the . . . [Produces a copy of *A Strong Australia*, a compilation of speeches he made in 2012]

How's it selling?

Well, it's a free book.

So it should be selling very well, then.

You can download this for free from the Liberal Party website. And look, there's 150 pages or thereabouts of specific policy commitments in here. Now, we will get rid of the carbon tax, we will get rid of the mining tax, we will restore the Australian Building and Construction Commission, there will be a fair dinkum paid parental leave scheme, there will be a standing "green army" 15,000 strong, there will be school councils and hospital community boards, there will be substantial new infrastructure spending like the Pacific Highway duplication, and so on. So there are dozens of specific policy commitments. If there's anyone who's relentlessly negative at the moment it's this government.

Speaking of negativity, many observers have said that 2012 was the most mean-spirited parliamentary year in living memory – do you think that's the case?

There's two points to make. The first is that the parliament takes its tone from the prime minister and each prime minister

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QUESTION TIME
"The current PM is utterly partisan," says Abbott.

brings a particular style to the parliament. Now, with Bob Hawke it was fairly folksy and genial; with Paul Keating it was very aggressive, but there was a certain wit; with John Howard it was statesmanlike – [he] would rarely simply stand up and attack the other side in his parliamentary speeches. With Kevin Rudd it was snide and long-winded, and with the current PM . . . well, it's utterly and relentlessly partisan.

You don't think that you as the opposition have had anything to do with that unconstructive tone?

The short answer is [we've made] little if any [contribution], and I invite people to compare and contrast, for argument's sake, my speech on the AWU on the last sitting day of the year, and Gillard's speech on the AWU on the last sitting day of the year. I invite people who are interested to look at any question time and look at the language that we use and look at the language that the government uses.

On the AWU controversy, you largely took a back seat and let your deputy Julie Bishop ask the questions. I think most people would agree her relentless attacks were pretty aggressive.

She's just asking the questions. I think no fair-minded observer would say that we have done anything other than attack the government over policy and posed legitimate questions over the government's conduct. Whereas the government has made the most over-the-top and unsubstantiated attacks on the opposition, often of a highly personal kind.

Were you personally offended by the prime minister labeling you a misogynist in her now-famous speech?

I was bemused, I suppose, because it was so unworthy of a prime minister. Quite apart from the fact that it was completely false and completely unjustifiable, it was completely irrelevant to the matter before the parliament at the time. I mean, she was defending the indefensible by making a completely unjustified attack. I'm no more a misogynist than she's a misandrist.

Surely it must have upset you on some level?

Didn't surprise me in the least. But no, of course it didn't.

Your approval rating is near historical lows and your disapproval rating is near historical highs – how have you kept your job?

By doing it extremely well. The job of the opposition leader is not to win a beauty contest, but to keep the opposition in a very strong political position, and I think we've been in a very strong political position at all times since I became the leader.

Be that as it may, politics is a beauty contest and popularity does matter. Is there a risk that come the election, people are going to say, "I don't like Labor, but I can't vote for Tony Abbott?"

Look, there'll be some people who'll vote Labor because they don't like me. Obviously I look at the polls like everyone else, but I spend a lot of time out on the street, I spend a lot of time in completely unstructured interactions with the general community, and the sense I get is that sure, people may disagree with me, but I don't think there's any lack of trust. I think there is a fundamental lack of trust when it comes to the government.

You said you intend to repeal the carbon tax. What steps would your government take to address climate change?

We've put in place the direct action policy that's been out there since February of 2010, and that involves better soil, more trees, smarter technology . . . I mean, essentially there'll be an emissions reduction fund of about a billion dollars a year that we'll pay for out of savings elsewhere in the budget, and we'll go to the market and buy what we think are the best-value and most appropriate proposals to reduce emissions. There'll be a dollar price to bring all this about, and we'll look at the price, we'll look at the competing alternatives and we'll make a decision as to which ones make the most sense.

But aren't we better off just accepting that converting to a low-emissions economy should cost us all money?

Well, I think that carrots are better than sticks, and the carbon tax is a stick. The emissions reduction fund is a carrot, and rather than the \$9 billion a year or so that the carbon tax is currently raising from the community, why not limit the cost of our climate change measures to roughly a billion dollars a year, which is what I'm proposing.

You've been critical of the government's education plan, largely because you believe it's unworkable. What would a Coalition government do to lift our falling education standards?

There is no doubt that in the last few years our world rankings on educational outcomes have declined. Money is always significant, but I think we shouldn't overestimate the importance of money; I think it's how you spend it rather than the quantum you spend that really matters. I think it's very important that we give public schools more autonomy, and that's why our proposal to have school councils appoint the principal and decide on the budget will make a big difference for the better. As for the funding side, we're committed to the system that's currently in place.

You mean state funding with . . .

We'll have more to say on education funding nearer the election, but we are as yet unpersuaded that the government has a proportionate response to this particular problem.

But the government's education proposals did appear to work for them. Bold announcements about . . .

[Interrupting] But typically of this government, they make grand statements which are difficult to disagree with, without giving you any detail or any dollars. Everyone accepts that the Gonski Report had much merit, but no one, least of all the government, has come up with a plausible way to find an extra \$6.5 billion a year, which is what Gonski would cost.

You talked earlier about finding savings elsewhere to pay for your emissions plan, and you're looking at making other cuts

too – how does that cost-savings mentality fit with your paid parental leave plan, which is far more generous than Labor's?

I'm not against spending – I am against wasteful spending. I'm particularly not against spending which actually boosts the productivity of our economy. And if we can get more women into the workforce, we will boost our productivity, we will grow the economic cake, as it were, and if you can get economic growth up, obviously there's much more revenue to fund much better services over time. And I think this is the big problem with the current government: they don't understand the need for economic growth. And they particularly don't understand the importance of helping people to be more productive.

Are you trying to tell me that the government of Australia is unaware of the importance of economic growth?

Well, they don't know how to get it. You don't get it by living beyond your means. You don't get it by clobbering the economy with new taxes. You don't get it by clobbering the economy with ever-more regulation. Sure, they pay lip-service to good management, but they deliver the opposite to good management.

Your position on same-sex marriage is well-known, but all reputable polls on the issue show a majority of Australians disagree with you. If you become prime minister, can you foresee a time where you might support same-sex marriage legislation?

I accept that this is a contentious issue. I accept that there are good arguments and deep passions on both sides of the issue. I am instinctively conservative on a subject like this and I

think that it's highly unlikely that I'm going to change my position. Now, you know, will the status quo last forever? I don't know. All I know is as far as I'm concerned, my position is clear, and while I'm in the parliament and in a position to vote should the thing come up, I'll vote for the traditional position.

We were talking earlier about the rancour of modern politics; could you ever imagine a time now where you could sit and have a cup of coffee and a chat with the prime minister?

Well, I have done that in the past on quite a few occasions. Sure, but let's say since the events of the last year.

We had quite a civil conversation about matters of national importance on a flight back from Perth a few months ago. Look, I'm quite capable of having a constructive conversation with the prime minister should the need arise. But as I said, the tone of the polity is set by the prime minister. Every parliament, the prime minister takes the lead and if there's a problem with the tone of our political discourse at the moment, I'm afraid the prime minister has to take respons . . .

[Interrupting] But surely you can choose to rise above that.

All I get to do is ask questions; the prime minister gets to make the statements in question time.

Okay. Two final questions then. First, what did you really think of "50 Shades of Grey"?

[Laughs] I thought it was rubbish. Absolute rubbish. It was kind of Mills & Boon on Viagra. But it's important to stay in touch with popular culture, and given that it's probably been the most widely read book of recent times I'm not sorry I read it.

Finally: if you could have one member of The Chaser thrown into jail forever, which one would it be?

[Laughs] I'd prefer to turn off the television set than throw anyone in jail. At their best The Chaser were uproariously funny. Like all comedians they would occasionally go over the top or they would have an occasional lapse of taste. But they were the funniest thing on TV for a while.

"Some people will vote Labor because they don't like me. People may disagree with me, but I don't think there's any lack of trust."