



Few familiar with Rudd are shocked by his exit

SCOTT PRASSER

THE sudden fall from grace of Kevin Rudd, his inability through lack of support to even contest the leadership, and the willingness of the Labor Party to dump a leader are unprecedented in Australian politics.

Indeed, Rudd's demise amounts to a dismissal almost as significant as governor-general John Kerr's dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975, except that this time the execution was carried out by the Labor caucus on one of their own.

Rudd's end and the way it occurred is significant because it shows how fast moving politics has become in Australia, driven by the media and polling.

It is significant that the Labor Party, once tolerant of unsuccessful leaders, is now so quick to sacrifice a prime minister who falters.

Rudd's end is also significant because he came to power on a wave of irrational hysteria from the Australian electorate and criticisms of the Howard government when Rudd and Labor had few real policy alternatives, beliefs and frameworks to offer in its place.

The real surprise for some who knew, experienced and observed Rudd when he worked for the Goss government in Queensland is not that Rudd has gone as suddenly as he came.

No, the surprise is that the increasingly questionable performance of Rudd as a prime minister and his government came as such a surprise to everyone else: the electorate, large sections of academe and other Canberra observers.

I warned about Rudd's "ruthless

style" as head of the Office of Cabinet in Queensland under the Goss Labor government on this page on January 11, 2007.

Look to how he operated in Queensland and you will understand what he would be like in "Canberraland" as prime minister: that was my message.

The script was there for all of us to see.

The insistence on control, the centralisation of decision-making, the impatience, the demands for more and more activity, the strains on the decision-making processes, the upsetting of ministers, the rush to implement without experience or knowledge or thought about how, were the very problems that weakened the Goss government and led to its unexpected rejection from office.

The script was there, but too few were willing to read what had happened in Queensland and to understand Rudd's real capacities and his limitations.

In the rush to kick out John Howard, to denigrate his abilities as a person and the achievements of his government, Rudd's fatal flaws and his record were not just overlooked but deliberately ignored.

As argued by some analysts before he became prime minister, we had no experience of Rudd as a minister in government and, just as importantly, neither did he.

This was not just an error by the electorate but a real mistake by the Labor Party.

His work and life experiences were not typical for the Labor Party, where negotiation rather than commands, compromise

rather than stubbornness, personalities and friendships rather than utility and value, are what count. And the way the Labor Party deserted him this week shows this.

Rudd never really understood the Labor Party nor the Labor Party him. Look at the way he sent a staff member as recently as this week to talk to the back bench about his prospects.

Similarly, we should not have been surprised by the Rudd government's policy failures. These were not just ones of implementation, as most suggest.

They were failures to be innovative, to bring fresh ideas and leadership. Rudd had never been big on new policy ideas, despite expansive rhetoric such as the "education revolution" that was low on content. Where has he ever shown any policy innovation in relation to foreign affairs?

His proposals in that area floundered just a couple of weeks ago. He was even a born-again fiscal conservative, though not practised in office.

He did not have an original idea in his platform. The tax reform was exaggerated and turned only on class politics. Compare this with others such as Gough Whitlam, Paul Keating, Bob Hawke and even Howard who often led debate on so many issues.

Just what will the Rudd government be remembered for? Nothing but policy failure and a failure to exercise appropriate personal and political skills to develop an agenda for real policy change.

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