Conclusion: Reflections on Abbott's Gambit—Mantras, manipulation and mandates

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The chapters in this volume chart the 2013 federal election in some depth: acknowledging the economic and social context in which it occurred; exploring its immediate history and the political context of a hung parliament; highlighting the role of an outright adversarial opposition intent solely on displacing the Labor Government; focusing on the leadership contest between the main protagonists, each marred in some way in the eyes of the electorate; examining the media coverage and often partisan commentary; reporting the frantic attempts to stage manage the main campaign; even following the meanderings and peccadillos of the campaign as they transpired in the eventuality, and explaining the results and swings recorded along with survey data reporting what factors drive voter attitudes. Across 24 chapters the contributors have provided a detailed descriptive account of the election, mainly for a general readership but using analytical themes and concepts when and as appropriate. The coverage of the campaign here is generally much wider and richer than in similar compilations undertaken in comparative overseas democracies, as is the range of contributors included in this volume. Whereas much of the international literature on elections and campaigning involves specialist scholars analysing campaign techniques and outcomes using academic models and theories (see the British Election Series from the University of Essex and the Nuffield series), our collection combines not just electoral specialists but also policy experts, political practitioners and party officials, political and media commentators and observers of Australian politics. Some of these contributors are explicitly partisan providing flavour, colour and insight. The compilation aims primarily to be accessible to general readers as well as specialists.

So how might we conclude this volume, drawing together the analyses from the many and varied chapters? The election brought to an end a tumultuous period of Labor Government and ushered in their conservative adversaries who appeared very under-equipped for government. As many chapters have argued, the election saw an unpopular Labor Government lose the election itself and become trapped in the pathology of defeat (see Chapters 1, 3, 10, 11, 12 and 24). Here was another example of the truism of 'governments losing elections rather than oppositions winning them'. Opinion polls and other forms of electoral prediction had for months consistently reported the electorate's

desire for a change of government, but also high levels of disaffection especially with the three political leaders: Abbott, Gillard and Rudd. While much of the national campaign strategies focused on the leaders and their images, as many polls showed and the AES confirmed, there was a strong dislike factor weighing against both Abbott and Rudd (see Chapters 3 and 24). As we discuss below, the narrow target strategy adopted by the Coalition, which highlighted merely a few 'wedge issues' in its campaigning, provided the new Abbott Government with a constrained mandate—a clear electoral mandate to abolish two controversial taxes (the carbon and mining taxes), to address boat people arrivals, to reduce the size of the public service and to introduce a generous paid parental leave scheme—but little else. Hence, the election was not so much a contest of policy ideas (and indeed some of the stranger announcements appeared as little more than 'thought bubbles') as it was a contest over which side of politics could provide the most competent majoritarian government, but with crossbenchers deliberately awarded the balance of power in the Senate and none of the main party blocs being able to dictate legislative outcomes alone.

To explain the electoral contest of 2013 that brought the experiment of the hung parliament to a close, we have chosen to conclude the analysis of this volume by focusing on three themes:

- the contest over campaign messages (the repeated *mantras*);
- the various ways in which the main political players attempted to seek partisan advantage (attempts at *manipulation*); and,
- the eventual nature of the *mandate* that came out of the election given the political context and counter-claims made.

We discuss each of these in turn.

Contending but uninspiring mantras

Unlike the 2010 federal election, which was contested over rival leadership credentials (see Simms and Wanna 2012), the 2013 election was largely fought over the battle of the slogans, simplistic catchphrases regularly repeated by leaders, frontbenchers, backbenchers and major party candidates. The resort to sloganeering was in one sense a rational (but cynical) political response to three phenomena: the growing proclivity for asserting headline statements often lacking in specificity and devoid of detail; a shrewd response to the risk-averseness of hyper-adversarial politics (concentrating on simply attacking one's opponents and allowing no chinks in one's own armour); and, as a preferred campaign tactic in a situation where many voters had made their mind up about

their voting intentions some months out from the poll (reminding voters not persuading them). Mantras dominated the campaign and arguably were seen by all sides as a 'least worst' tactic to adopt.

From the outset of the campaign proper, all major parties promoted the concept of 'change' and renewal—a new beginning, a 'new way', or a 'new plan'. The consistency of these aspirational mantras suggests that all the parties were reading that the electorate was exasperated with the previous period in politics and especially the in-fighting of the Labor ministry. But when these messages failed to resonate, they were quickly jettisoned (especially by the ALP) in favour of direct negative attacks on opponents and negative advertising generally. Some of the minor parties also promoted change and renewal, feeding on a general sense of disaffection.

The lack of policy detail was an intentional ploy adopted by both sides at times, but particularly by the Coalition (see, Australian Labor Party 2013a; Department of Finance and Deregulation and The Treasury 2013). When slogans substitute for detailed policy, the electorate is asked to agree with the sentiment, not analyse whether the policy 'stacks up' plausibly or seems reasonable and acceptable (see Johnson's chapter). Moreover, when few or no details were provided there was less chance of exciting pockets of opposition and voices of dissent which might perhaps question what was in it for them personally. Keeping policy to mere slogans was meant to convince voters of the general benefits rather than allow opponents to nit-pick at the specifics. The proposal to abolish the carbon tax was one clear example of this investment in a particular mantra without providing policy detail that might upset potential supporters. Equally, it is hard to cost or quantify slogans. Labor, in particular complained that, while it had provided detailed Department of Finance costings for key policies, the Coalition had not provided equivalent information (see Australian Labor Party 2013b). Nonetheless, the Coalition did release some information and claimed that its policies had been rigorously costed (Hockey and Robb 2013).

Among their more prominent policy commitments there were some areas of major disagreement (such as over the carbon tax, the resource rental tax, the dimensions of the fiscal problem, and the better parental leave scheme) but also some surprising areas of agreement—which did not necessarily neutralise issues in the minds of voters. Both parties out-bid each other on the need to get tougher on asylum seekers and conduct off-shore processing of boat people, on the importance of better infrastructure, stronger defence, better schools and increased educational funding, a more productive economy, and skills and training for the labour market, and the need to fund a national disability carer scheme based on client choice.

Both sides had announced cuts to public services and to the number of public servants employed by the Commonwealth. For Labor these reductions (of 12,000 to 14,000) announced well before the election campaign period were presented as prudent government policy imposed through the 'efficiency dividend'; but when their conservative opponents announced they were going to make further cuts, they were denounced as irresponsible and heartless. The Coalition implied it would cut as many as 15,000 to 16,500 public servants and reduce the number of agencies, and it was often assumed that this figure was in addition to the Labor cuts—making reductions of up to 25,000 officials possible, as the public sector unions often claimed. However, later the Coalition clarified it was seeking 16,500 redundancies or separations in total. The fear of job losses and counter-threats over proposed public sector cuts consumed much of the election 'heat', although the fact that both sides were engaged in the same exercise largely neutralised it as a negative for either side.

Mantras were also directed explicitly at adversaries and protagonists. While Rudd painted his opponent as an untrustworthy adversary who had a secret austerity agenda, Abbott continued to specialise in the repetition of pithy three word slogans, such as 'stop the boats', 'turn back boats', 'axe the tax', 'big new tax', and occasionally 'just say no'. His strategy was to frame the wedge issues he had chosen to campaign upon and relentlessly drill them into the electorate's consciousness. Rudd responded with a counter-slogan accusing Abbott of seeking 'cuts, cuts, cuts'.

With the election underway, Joe Hockey, Tony Abbott and Andrew Robb all began to emphasise that Australia was facing a 'budget emergency' caused by the looming fiscal problems that the Labor Government had failed to rectify. The persistence of a sizeable deficit and growing levels of debt were sufficient to underscore this message in the minds of voters, despite Labor's attempts to argue that they were relatively small in international terms. Both Abbott and Hockey then promised to balance the budget well before the date by which Labor had committed to do so. To provide some reassurance that any government he would lead would not impose outright austerity on ideological grounds, Tony Abbott promised that there would be 'no unnecessary tax increases' and infamously said to the SBS TV audience on the eve of the election that there would be 'no cuts to education, no cuts to health, no change to pensions, no change to the GST and no cuts to the ABC or SBS' (see also Hockey and Robb 2013). So, although these commitments were meant to reassure vacillating voters they had nothing to fear, these statements would come to haunt the Government, and later in 2014 expose it to claims it had broken its election commitments—just as Gillard had earlier done. Here was one of the dilemmas at the heart of Abbott's gambit, going hard and negative in opposition helped him to win government but also shaped voters' perceptions of how he was meant to behave in government.

Despite honing their mantras, there were so many comments made during the campaign that ultimately few of them resonated; there were no ‘cut-through’ messages or consistent themes, such as John Howard managed in 2001 with his ‘we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come ...’, or the momentum Kevin Rudd generated in 2007 with his *Kevin07* brand (see Snow 2013). In that sense the 2013 election campaign became a lackadaisical affair where both sides, for different reasons, went through the motions without expecting a fundamental turnaround, though Labor at least hoped to contain losses.

Attempts at manipulation

As in previous elections, the party campaign strategies for the federal election of 2013 were highly stage managed. Centrally planned strategies and schedules around the leader dominated the main campaign trajectories while bottom-up campaigns from local electorates enhanced candidate recognition and reinforced certain messages. Protagonists relentlessly stayed on script almost to the point of tediousness (or, as in the case of Jaymes Diaz, who could not recall the six-point border protection policy, were airbrushed from view); ‘Noddy shots’ all had the local candidate looking serious and nodding sagely with every utterance of the leaders when in camera; fake images were everywhere with candidates desperately trying to ‘fit in’ with the local communities they visited; flimsy gimmicks and disingenuous photo opportunities for the nightly news underscored the blandness of the contest and further dumbed down the contest.

Image manipulation again proved powerful. In his post-election analysis included in this volume, Brian Loughnane, Federal Director of the Liberal Party of Australia, argues that the Coalition won the 2013 election because of a combination of factors, and cites: Labor’s broken commitment not to introduce a carbon tax; its inability to deal with border security; issues of economic management; and, the soap opera saga of Labor disunity while in government, which culminated in Julia Gillard being supplanted by the leader she had previously replaced, namely Kevin Rudd. Loughnane readily acknowledges the important role played for the conservatives by support groups for local candidates, including improved use of social media technology and micro-targeting of key voters. Furthermore, Loughnane wishes to emphasise that the Liberals also ran a positive agenda, concluding that ‘while Labor’s internal crisis provided opportunity for the Coalition, it was not inevitable that we would win the election. The community wanted something to vote *for* not just *against*’.

Needless to say, there are aspects of Loughnane’s analysis which politicians from opposing parties and some academic commentators would find contentious. For

example, the role played by Labor disunity is widely acknowledged, including by George Wright, National Secretary of the Australian Labor Party, in this volume. However, Loughnane's depiction of the image of 'chaos, instability and dysfunction' associated with the Labor Government in the public mind, fails to adequately acknowledge the key role of the Opposition in successfully promulgating and manipulating that image for its own ends, given that the Gillard Government alone actually passed over 500 pieces of legislation. Furthermore, no government bills were defeated in the House of Representatives (although some that might have been were not put forward or were allowed to lapse) and the Gillard minority Government was far more successful at passing legislation than was the case with many past governments facing a hostile Senate. Though as George Wright admits, while he might claim that the Rudd and Gillard governments 'kept Australia out of a world recession', and pursued worthwhile policies in regard to education, information technology and disability, the Labor Government did not manage to sell its reform credentials well. The analysis here suggests that Labor failed to adequately sell its legacy of reform not only because of poor communication strategies and major issues with implementation, but because of Labor's internal machinations—for example, Rudd was loathe to acknowledge Gillard's achievements. By contrast, the Coalition was more successful at selling its framing of the successive Labor governments as dysfunctional and chaotic.

Despite predictable disagreements between the three partisan analyses from the party officials, all three provide essential insights into modern campaigning, emphasising the presidentialisation of campaigns and the growing professionalisation of politics that is analysed in more depth in the chapters by Young and Reece amongst others, and the increasing use of social media that is analysed by Chen. Meanwhile the leadership issues alluded to by both Loughnane and Wright are analysed in more depth by Walter and Strangio, who argue the increasing personalisation of politics, and the mediatisation of politics that it partly reflects, has resulted in increased voter volatility. Bean and McAllister's analysis reinforces Walter's and Strangio's arguments regarding the influence of attitudes towards political leaders on party identification. Manning and Phiddian also note the focus on leadership in their analysis of political cartoons. Meanwhile, as Errington points out, the traditional media also played a key role in both propagating and reinforcing particular framings of issues and particular depictions of the Labor Government, the Coalition and their respective leaders.

However, a key message of this book is that election outcomes are normally decided by a complex combination of factors and the 2013 Australian election was no exception. Institutional factors and the ways in which the various actors attempt to manipulate the system for partisan advantage tend to come into play

and shape the eventual outcomes. The preferential nature of the Australian voting system is wide open to this sort of manipulation and preference swapping has become a dark art and a science. As Antony Green points out in his chapter, the role of preferences was essential in keeping Labor at all competitive given a 'disastrous decline' in its first preference votes. The Greens survived in the upper house largely on preferences. But other minor players also got in on the act. Green notes that 'in both the House and Senate, support for non-major party candidates rose to levels never previously recorded at an Australian national election' and candidates were elected with infinitesimally small primary votes and with many other voters not being aware their votes were being channelled to these candidates. Once again institutional factors, including the 'light touch' regulation of campaign financing and the relative ease with which minor parties can be formed, played a role as is pointed out in our introduction to this volume.

Reactions to continuous opinion polling can also be an influential institutional factor. Generally regular polling tends to focus on calculating the likely two-party-preferred outcome, and this can affect not only the behaviour of the principal contestants but also shape the expectations of the electorate as to the likely outcome. (As Jackman points out in his chapter, other predictions of voting outcomes, such as the betting markets, often draw on polling information too). Who voters think will win can have a marked impact on the directions of their own voting intentions. Yet, as Goot points out, even though the polls were accurate in predicting overall trends, they were often less successful at predicting outcomes in selected regions and specific seats (for example, western Sydney and some battlefield seats across the nation). It is here that the complex regional factors analysed by Robinson, Jaensch, Wear and Miragliotta, along with other factors such as the ethnic voting analysed by Jupp, come into play. As does the success of the major parties in sand-bagging individual seats that are vulnerable, using traditional methods such as door-knocking as well as new methods such as social media and sophisticated databases that allow micro-targeting, including the individualised massaging highlighted in Young's chapter. Meanwhile the role of minor parties, including exceptionally well-funded new ones such as the Palmer United Party (see the chapter by King), and the unexpected successful local campaigns run by independents such as Cathy McGowan (see chapter by Curtin and Costar), are further wildcards that can influence the outcomes in particular seats and in the Senate. In the case of the 2013 election, the Greens also had a notable success in retaining Adam Bandt's seat of Melbourne. Some Greens felt that other winnable seats were sacrificed in order to shore-up Bandt's seat for symbolic reasons.

The marketability of specific policy issues was carefully assessed by campaigners, as Reece eloquently describes in his chapter. The importance to the parties of economic management issues is emphasised in both Loughnane's and Wanna's

chapters, while Johnson identifies the significant roles in party discourse played by the fear of government debt and concerns over personal financial security. Economou emphasises the importance of the carbon tax as an iconic economic issue. Bean and McAllister's analysis confirms the role of issues made more salient by the parties themselves: promises to solve the issues of economic management, stem the flow of asylum seekers and reduce taxation influenced support for the Coalition, while the Labor Party's record and commitments to education and health continued to influence support for its candidates in the campaign. Interestingly though, Gray, Manwaring and Orchard outline the Coalition's success in partially neutralising issues that might have worked to their disadvantage, such as health and education, thereby cauterising Labor's scare tactics about cuts under an Abbott Government. Meanwhile, as McLaren and Sawyer note, both major parties attempted to mobilise the masculinity of the two leaders in their stage-managed campaigning, and in the process some important gender issues involving women were marginalised.

An afflicted mandate

There was some commentary in the aftermath of the 2013 election of the result not being quite as devastating a defeat for Labor, and conversely not quite a convincing win for the conservatives. Malcolm Mackerras (2013) opined that the final result was a 'respectable loss'—implying that Labor's defeat was not as dire as some had expected or that one opinion poll of marginal electorates had implied some six months out from the poll (see JWS Research 2013, covering 54 marginal seats with margins under 6 per cent). However, such a view has limited plausibility and only holds up if the 2013 election is looked at totally in isolation, whereas we would argue the 2010 and 2013 elections should be judged together in terms of a two-stage trajectory that removed Labor from government. The combined swing to the Coalition from 2007 to 2013 was 3.78 per cent in the primary vote and 6.19 per cent in two-party-preferred terms.

Moreover, Labor's primary vote was the lowest recorded in 110 years (since 1903). In the 28 federal elections since 1943, Labor's vote had only fallen below 40 per cent on six previous occasions (in 2010, 2004, 2001, 1996, 1990 and 1977), which suggests a serious structural malaise in recent decades. In 2013 it fell to 33.38 per cent—a further swing of 4.61 per cent from Labor's result in 2010, and a combined swing of exactly 10 per cent since the *Kevin07* election of 2007. Its two-party-preferred vote was 46.51 per cent, a swing against the party of 3.61 per cent. Labor's two-party-preferred vote was almost identical to that of its loss in 1996 (a mere 0.14 per cent difference at 46.38 per cent in 1996) and one would have to go back to the spectacular losses in 1975 and 1977 to find

lower two-party-preferred votes. In the 24 elections since 1949, Labor's two-party-preferred vote was higher than in 2013 on 18 occasions, and only on six was it lower (in 1955, 1958, 1966, 1975, 1977 and 1996). Labor's sanguineness at the election result, reflected in George Wright's chapter, was probably due to the fact that it expected to be mauled more severely and was relieved that its frontbench talent managed to survive the defeat (except David Bradbury in Lindsay, and Mike Kelly in Eden-Monaro). Labor was far less sanguine about its Senate vote where it lost six Senate positions and was reduced to 12 returning Senators—and with only one position re-elected from two mainland states (SA and WA), reducing their total representation to 25 from July 2014—less than one-third of the chamber.

The Coalition's primary support was far from their highest winning margin. In terms of primary votes, Abbott's gambit win was close to the party's average result, but *lower* than 11 previous election victories since the previous hung parliament of 1941–43 (namely, in 2004, 1996, 1980, 1977, 1975, 1966, 1963, 1958, 1955, 1954 and 1949). Significantly, it was also a result *below* that of two Coalition losses (the elections of 1987 and 1974). Moreover, in two-party terms the Coalition did not manage to attract a consistent nationwide swing towards it, and did not achieve a majority in three out of the eight jurisdictions (Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT). The Coalition also lost one Senate seat in Victoria to the Motoring Enthusiasts Party.

Hence, the 2013 election was a further defeat for Labor and part of a longer trend in sliding support, but not a spectacular win for the Coalition. That 21.07 per cent of the electorate either voted for parties/candidates other than the major parties, or voted informally, suggests a high degree of voter disaffection. If the fact that some 1.5 million Australian adults are entitled to be on the electoral roll but have not registered because they are not interested in politics is taken into account, then there is a substantial measure of societal disaffection with the politics on offer. This feature is not so much evidence of a 'democratic deficit' as of a deep-seated disaffection with the current state of democracy and political parties and politicians. Opinion polls of younger voters especially have indicated a high degree of questioning over the value of democracy or its effectiveness as a preferred system of government.

The Greens similarly could not be content with their level of electoral endorsement; they suffered a 3.11 per cent swing against them in the lower house and a swing of -4.46 in the Senate. Although their representation increased by one additional Senator, their upper house representation was almost totally dependent on preference flows in each state from the Labor Party and some smaller minor parties. In 2013 the Greens seemed to have inherited the status of 'least worst' among the minor parties, a position once held by the Australian Democrats.

Of course in Australia the notion of a 'dual mandate' is highly pertinent; the government is formed and claims a given mandate through its control over the House of Representatives, but the upper house Senate also enjoys an elected mandate—they are usually expected to scrutinise executive government and allow for different voices and preferences in the legislature. While Abbott managed a comfortable majority (of 30 seats) in the lower house, his side of politics fell short of gaining a majority in the Senate. Eight Labor Senators retired or were defeated from among the outgoing members compared to four from the Coalition benches; Labor managed to elect two new Senators as replacements to the Liberals' three, while the Greens gained an extra Senate position (in Victoria). In addition, three Palmer United Senators were elected for the first time, plus a Family First candidate, a Liberal Democrat and a Motoring Enthusiast. The final composition of the Senate after July 2014 was: Coalition 33 seats (down one seat); Labor 25 seats (down six seats); the Greens with 10 Senators (up one seat); Palmer United with three new Senators; plus one Senator each from Family First, Liberal Democrats, Democratic Labor, the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party and Nick Xenophon. The Coalition would require the votes of at least six additional Senators to pass their legislation if Labor and the Greens oppose their measures.

The other aspect of the mandate that has attracted attention is the way in which Tony Abbott campaigned and led the Opposition parties to victory. His 'relentless negativism' and pillorying of Julia Gillard for reversing her commitment not to introduce a carbon tax, was widely seen as strident and uncompromising. The Coalition also made some of its own commitments in the lead up to the 2013 election and, given what it had railed so vehemently against since 2010, voters could reasonably expect it to be bound to honour these commitments to the letter (especially the commitments to stop the boats, abolish the carbon and mining taxes, introduce no new taxes and not change the GST, not cut pension benefits or education and health budgets, and preserve the funding for the public broadcasters). In many ways Abbott painted himself into a tight corner with his 'preserve the status quo' commitments, leaving his government little room to manoeuvre without being forced to break his commitments.

To the next instalment ...

So, if elections are normally decided by a complex combination of factors, an extraordinary combination came together to determine the outcome of the 2013 election, both in terms of the formation of a new Coalition Government, the plight of the out-going Labor Party, the survival of the Greens and inauguration of the Palmer Party, as well as in terms of the unexpected outcomes in the Senate and some individual seats. In an era of perpetual election cycles and constant

campaigning, the parties have already begun to assess how they should be positioning themselves for the next election, whenever that takes place, and under whatever circumstances. It is often observed that parties, like military generals, fight the next campaign according to their own post mortem of their performance in the last one; building on what aspects they did well and rectifying those aspects that went badly. It constitutes a form of 'rear vision' campaigning or backward mapping. Going forward, therefore, we might expect the Coalition to include greater policy detail and be more forthcoming in their appeal to voters; Labor to stress unity, stability and consistency; the Greens to become less amorphous and prone to ambulance chasing; and Palmer and some of the other fringe jester parties to better hone their appeals to the disaffected while continuing to entertain.

But these are more volatile times. The previous conservative government lasted four successive terms, looked competent for most of that time and frequently out-manoeuvred its Labor opponents. The Abbott Government began office somewhat shakily (as did Howard in 1996 and Rudd in 2008) and as yet does not appear to have fully mastered the art of government. The Coalition's party discipline and unity in opposition helped to deliver it victory, but the imperatives of government are more pressing, especially in a time of reduced revenues, and likely to re-open old divisions and internal debates. In 2013 Labor appeared to be partially successful in its strategy of saving the furniture and the cherished careers of its frontbench team, but does that provide a sufficient base on which to rebuild the party's fortunes without some major internal changes, a reassessment of what the party stands for and the cultivation of a more attractive appeal to voters? Labor's disastrously low primary vote may remain an enduring concern for it into the future, particularly given the Greens long-term goal of challenging the 'century-long' stranglehold that the major parties have on the Australian political system. Yet the Greens are not the only party fighting for the 'protest vote' and peeling voters from the major parties. The initial spectacular showing of the well-resourced Palmer group captured protest votes from the major parties and from other minor parties alike.

In their respective chapters in this volume, both national campaign directors of the major parties argue that their respective sides of politics have the better vision for the future. For Wright, issues such as tackling climate change, disability, education and broadband will not go away and Labor, he argues, is well-positioned as the party committed to pursuing them. In Loughnane's view the Liberals' policy positions in regard to issues such as economic management and border security are 'much more closely aligned to the concerns of the community than Labor's'. But whether the new Coalition Government can continue to stay tightly focused and deliver electorally desirable outcomes, or

whether Labor can rebuild as a competitive force in opposition in very difficult and uncertain economic and social times, remains to be seen. That will be one of the tasks for the next book in this series to assess.

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