

We must tolerate failure if we want courageous leaders

Leadership The 24 hour media cycle does not tolerate failure, but good leaders must take risks and if voters want the best they must tolerate the occasional mis-step as part of government.

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The recent demise of Queensland Premier Campbell Newman, and Prime Minister Tony Abbott's shaky leadership share one thing. Both flew too close to the electoral sun.

Abbott and Newman mistakenly thought their personal and electoral mandates allowed them full licence to take on vested interests – whether the Labor Party, crossbenchers, unions, doctors, whoever – opposing their political will. Both forgot that jittery supporters, as well as opponents, can break leaders as well as make them.

Newman and Abbott, and Victoria's Jeff Kennett before them, are stark reminders that Australian politics are less about innovative policies furthering the prosperity of our nation and its people, and too much about feeding red meat to a baying mob frenzied by mainstream and social media agitators of both Left and Right.

Any sign of weakness from a PM, opposition leader or frontbencher is seized on and, as Abbott's ill-judged knighting of Prince Philip showed, even minor stuff-ups become crises courtesy of the pitiless media cycle and endless opinion polls. Indeed, since the LNP's Queensland January election debacle, and notwithstanding education minister Christopher Pyne's macho posing over uni fees, the Abbott government appears reform-shy: last week the PM all but promised that the forthcoming budget will be a tame affair after last year's fireworks.

Lowest common denominator democracy in the social media age discourages policy innovation and courage. Politicians fear straying from electoral comfort zones for fear of voter retribution. When they do mishandle unpopular reforms – such as Abbott's GP co-payment and higher education fee deregulation that have damaged Abbott, or Julia Gillard and her leadership-destroying carbon tax – their opponents tear into them like populist piranhas. Or, in Clive Palmer's case, dinosaurs.

Australian political leaders seemingly have forgotten the patient arts of tilling the ground, by making a clear case for major policy change so that its announcement is almost an anti-climax, and then winning crucial public and parliamentary votes by constantly explaining, listening and negotiating. John Howard and Peter Costello did that with their Goods and Services Tax, but Kevin Rudd, Gillard and now Abbott are paying dearly for failing to do likewise.

Also, Abbott is haunted by the Coalition's losing the "unlosable" 1993 election when he was press secretary to Liberal leader John Hewson. Hewson's radical but imaginative and innovative *Fightback!* manifesto was perhaps the biggest disruption to political consensus since Federation. In the end, however, Paul Keating defeated Hewson with one devastating populist line: "if you don't understand it, don't vote for it". Unsurprisingly, post-*Fightback!* federal and state oppositions contest elections by being small targets, promising to repeal incumbents' unpopular policies and otherwise changing as little as possible: not a great mandate for innovative thinking and policy leadership if and when elected.

Such political risk aversion is abetted by process-driven and often unimaginative bureaucracy. For a promising public servant, being an innovative, independent thinker in a Taylorist hierarchy far too often is career-limiting. Even though not directly accountable to the people, top federal and state bureaucrats are too mindful of Bismarck's dictum that politics is the art of the possible and not of the impossible. Sir Humphrey Appleby's ironic "Courageous decision, Minister" is policymaking reality.

Overall, then, our political and policy culture is relentlessly negative instead of inspiring our leaders' courage and innovation. Under blistering public scrutiny, and mainstream and social media's delight in "gotchas" as silly as verballing shadow treasurer Chris Bowen over tax thresholds, no wonder both Coalition and Labor leaders these days prefer popularity over innovation in government, and appeal to the electorate's baser anti-change instincts in opposition. Reformist prime ministers or premiers seeking re-election – such as New South Wales premier Mike Baird this week – they risk the wrath of an unforgiving and fearful electorate for doing what's right. It's no wonder that many choose the path of least resistance.

If only our politics could embrace the principle that it is acceptable to fail from time to time without the world caving in. The word "fail" is also an acronym for First Attempt In Learning, and even national leaders can't be perfect people always being perfect. They need to be able to learn from their mistakes – as John F. Kennedy did with the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco – without the permanent fear of being torn down from every side. Learning from mistakes applies in everyday life: why not in government?

We love to hate politicians, but our failure-intolerant politics kills their reformist courage. If we want our elected leaders to be innovative and courageous, and our nation to be well-steered through current and future social, economic and political storms, we must tolerate, and even forgive, their failing sometimes.

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