

Gillard leadership reaches tattered stage
National Times
July 19, 2012
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Julia Gillard's leadership has reached that tattered stage where she is victim to random stirrings.

This week, government whip Joel Fitzgibbon set off a new round of speculation when he said, in effect, that unpopular leaders eventually get their come-uppance.

Then came a report in The Australian Financial Review that the heavy hitters of the union movement at a meeting on Tuesday canvassed the prospect of Kevin Rudd returning to the leadership. The fact that ACTU secretary Dave Oliver contested the report makes little difference; anything that feeds into leadership talk stirs things along, regardless of the nuances.

The central issue at the meeting was getting together a union battle plan — the plan is for a \$2 a head levy on union members.

The unions leaders were not primarily concentrated on the leadership, but rather recognising reality. They can read the polls as well as anyone else. It is not so much a matter of actively backing a change — some would be very much against — as knowing that it might well happen. They realise that in the present volatile climate, if things don't turn up (and few think they will), momentum will gather for the switch.

People present did make the point that they don't want to see an early election. Aware there almost certainly will be a Liberal government, they would like to delay its arrival as long as possible. While they realise a move to Rudd may well occur, they also know that Rudd's becoming leader would make a premature poll more likely than if Gillard hung on.

Key union figures, most notably the Australian Workers' Union's Paul Howes, had a prominent role in the coup against Rudd. In February, union support for Gillard was important in ensuring she overwhelmingly trounced Rudd. But in the likely turmoil ahead, Gillard can't rely on such strong backing from the industrial base.

Not that the unions would welcome a return to Rudd. Apart from the prospect that he could have to, or choose to, go to the polls early, they are fully aware that he is less sympathetic to them and their agendas than is Gillard. But though Gillard will have her diehard backers in the union movement, others will take the view that if there is a tide, there is a limit to what can be done to hold it back.

While the unions are thinking ahead to the election campaign, their eyes are also scanning the horizon beyond that — how to cope with an Abbott prime ministership. But at least, many of them expect, they may well then have one of their own in the opposition leadership, with Bill Shorten an early favourite for the job.

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