

Better the unions' lackey than Howard's bitch-boy

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Part of the reason for Kevin Rudd's remarkable ascension in the polls has been that since he became Labor leader he has acted as if he were already prime minister.

Rudd was the opposite of Kim Beazley's "me too" politics. He jettisoned the Beazley "small target" approach and opted to occupy the centre stage. He set the agenda with policy initiatives: in education there were measures to improve numeracy and literacy, and to attract students to science and maths; on the economy, to improve productivity and on communications, to roll out a national broadband network. John Howard seemed unable to make any gains. Not even a big spending budget that pelted the electorate with money made any difference. The rise and rise of Rudd was confounding the Coalition. Nothing seemed able to stop him.

But by the end of last week Rudd had lost his aura of invincibility.

It looked as if Howard had finally begun to mess with Rudd's mind and was wresting back the political initiative that the Opposition Leader has maintained for so long. Rudd appeared reactive and defensive. He was no longer in charge.

He'd been tripped up by a couple of embarrassing leaks of documents from his office, one of which undermined his attack on the Government's economic management credentials. Most tellingly, he seemed to have been manoeuvred into overreacting to a video of the CFMEU official Joe McDonald swearing at a boss on a building site. Rudd's response was to summon the national executive and demand McDonald's expulsion.

Anyone who has watched the video in full can see the exchange was more humorous than threatening and could hardly be construed as violent, certainly not within the norms of the building industry. Indeed, McDonald has even garnered some sympathy for the fact that he was trying to represent safety issues for workers when he was filmed: "On average one worker is killed on an Australian construction site every week," he said on Thursday. "Both of the jobs where I was filmed were plagued by safety issues and continue to be."

Rudd now finds himself in a dangerous place on the issue of union power. Having demanded the expulsion from the ALP of two unionists in the past few weeks for allegedly "thuggish" behaviour, how does he react as further instances inevitably come to light? He risks alienating ALP union affiliates if he continues down this path but, a far bigger danger, he seemed to accept the Government hypothesis about the dangers of union

power. His political flexibility is curtailed by being positioned - wedged? - by the Government.

You might have expected a Labor leader to stand up for the more than 20 per cent of workers who are still in unions. They include large number of essential services workers - nurses, teachers, police officers - who generally enjoy high levels of public support. You might also have expected a Labor leader to point to the extraordinary financial success of union super funds which have consistently outperformed retail funds (Now that's union power!).

By appearing to accept that union power equals union thuggery, Rudd has closed off these options. He was also unable to frame a calibrated response to Howard's dramatic announcement of federal intervention to stop child sexual abuse in indigenous communities. He "me too-ed" when he should have questioned the lack of consultation with political and indigenous leaders and asked why it is necessary to seize land ownership to address welfare and police matters.

If he continues to veer back to the Beazley way of opposition, Rudd won't be moving to Canberra at the end of the year. But maybe he has already woken up to this.

Yesterday morning, Rudd put on a crackerjack performance with Laurie Oakes on the *Sunday* television program. He leapfrogged over the Prime Minister with announcements that addressed some of the deficiencies of the indigenous children's rescue package: lack of political consultation and lack of police resources. Rudd would recruit 500 extra federal police and create a national war cabinet to oversee the national emergency on indigenous child sexual abuse.

The last Australian political leader who invited the opposition to help handle a national crisis was John Curtin, who persuaded Robert Menzies to join his wartime cabinet. Is Rudd once again adopting the mantle of prime minister, telling Howard how it should be done? Has he side-stepped the union power wedge with his disclosure yesterday that he'd consulted the Police Federation (the body for police unions) about the large increase in recruiting?

It's too early to say if Rudd has halted the Howard clawback and made himself the Comeback Kid but that is clearly what he has to do if he is to win the top job this year.

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