

Government avoids the heavy artillery

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For anyone tempted to think, or maybe hope, that the Government is losing its touch after 10 years in power, the past week has provided a powerful refutation.

And it's not just the Prime Minister's obvious (and appalling) wedge on the ACT legislation on gay civil unions or his predictable portrayal of Kim Beazley as a trade union pawn, but the feisty diversionary tactics employed by three cabinet ministers - all of them women - to help keep the media spotlight off some intractable problems that are giving the Government big headaches.

First there was Western Australian Julie Bishop, the Minister for Science, who is scurrying as fast as she can up the ladder of ministerial opportunity.

Her parliamentary performances are polished and, for someone so new to the cut and thrust of the dispatch box, very assured. She does not use notes. On Wednesday and Thursday last week she came under fire from Labor on the subject of accidents at Sydney's Lucas Heights nuclear power reactor. Labor's deputy leader, Jenny Macklin, had some inside information about a leak of radioactive gas and she demanded the minister provide explanation and reassurance. Bishop confirmed there had been an accident, said there was nothing to worry about then slammed Labor for engaging in a "beat-up to deflect from the fact that we're having an open debate on nuclear power".

That same evening the Immigration Minister, Amanda Vanstone, said out loud what everyone knew: that the Government's controversial proposals for asylum seekers were designed to appease the Indonesian Government. "We are taking into account what the Indonesians want because they are very helpful to us on border protection," the minister told the ABC's Kerry O'Brien on *The 7.30 Report*.

Many people thought Vanstone had put her foot in her mouth but she is too savvy to be lured even by an expert like O'Brien into tripping up. The transcript shows that O'Brien was trying to close the interview when Vanstone chose to make these comments. She then repeated them. Never mind that she did a bit of a backtrack on radio the next morning. She knew what she was doing.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, and the Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, had been denying the laws were anything but a sovereign act on Australia's part but it cannot have hurt, in the complex diplomatic chess game in which the Government is engaged, to have had the Immigration Minister publicly acknowledge Indonesia's role in assisting with Australian border protection. Especially while an Indonesian parliamentary delegation was in the country.

They would have heard and been reassured by Vanstone's admission. But perhaps an even bigger benefit was that Vanstone absorbed most of the media oxygen that night - ensuring that even off-the-record air time was denied to the Government backbenchers who are threatening to cross the floor if the legislation is not toned down. That, of course, is the next problem the Government has to deal with.

The next day, Thursday, Labor came back at Bishop in Parliament with chapter and verse of 12 nuclear incidents in the past year including a worrying one of a leaking canister that had been transferred from the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation cyclotron in inner-city Camperdown to Lucas Heights. Bishop went for the high ground. "This is all about Labor trying to get the Lucas Heights reactor closed down," she thundered. "You are trying to close down medical services for cancer sufferers across Australia."

Over the next stormy 14 minutes, while Bishop stonewalled and with the aid of a compliant Speaker, five Labor members were ejected from the chamber. That became the story on that night's television. You had to drill very deep into ABC radio coverage to hear the admission from Dr George Collins, the chief of research at the nuclear science organisation, that the four reported accidents last week at Lucas Height was "very unusual".

"The normal pattern of these instances is that there would be one a month," he said.

Really? Who knew it was "normal" for there to be an accident involving nuclear contamination at Lucas Heights every four weeks? And why has the rate of accident suddenly increased? These are serious questions but they were not getting any answers from a political point-scoring minister, not while the Government tries to head off awkward issues of safety and cost in its debate on nuclear power. Mission accomplished, Ms Bishop.

That same day, the Minister for Communications found the mother of all media diversions when she announced the appointment to the ABC board of Keith Windschuttle, a lightweight academic who achieved infamy through attacking the methodology of some of Australia's leading historians of Aboriginal resistance to European settlement. Senator Helen Coonan said in her press release that Windschuttle's background in "media, journalism and publishing" would be "an asset to the ABC board", a point that was hotly disputed by outraged commentators who were able to retrieve scads of ABC-hostile quotes from Windschuttle.

Coonan announced new appointments to the SBS board the same day but she chose not to be inflammatory with the multicultural broadcaster, merely reappointing two of the business directors and installing a former auditor with the United Nations as the new director. It is unlikely Windschuttle will be able to do any more to further damage the ABC than previous and far more politically adept appointees Michael Kroger and Maurice Newman managed, but Coonan clearly enjoys taunting the ABC. "It's not as if Mr Windschuttle has been appointed chairman," she said in an interview. In other words, she could have appointed Joe Blow, for all the power he'll have, but that would have been far less fun.

It might also have been far less effective at distracting media attention from the fact Rupert Murdoch had just torn up his support for her proposed new media-ownership laws, leaving Coonan with the invidious problem of which media moguls to side with (Packer and Stokes, or Murdoch) if she hopes to get her reforms through Parliament. The ownership of our media will have a far more important impact on diversity of opinion and the quality of our journalism than any little bunch of self-important *Quadrant* commentators trooping into the ABC once a month. But Coonan apparently does not want us to talk about that.