

Mad ads won't help PM

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Some people in the Labor Party are delusional. They think Kevin Rudd's problem is that he's not "selling" his policies. Apparently, if he improved his "retail politics" his poll standing would rise.

According to this theory what's needed for the ALP to win the next federal election is for Kevin Rudd not to lose his temper on *The 730 Report*, to spend more taxpayer dollars on advertising and be photographed talking to a few more sick people in a few more hospitals.

This approach might succeed - but it probably won't. It's been tried, and it failed. Certainly, Rudd could be nicer during interviews. But the reason he now faces the real risk of being thrown out of The Lodge by the electorate, or sooner by his own caucus, is not because he uttered obscenities about the Chinese government to a journalist.

Prime ministers don't have to be liked by the electorate or by their parliamentary colleagues. It's when voters and MPs regard their leader with disdain that matters approach being terminal. Saying the Rudd government would be more successful if it spent more money on advertising it like saying the Whitlam government would be better if only it had employed more media advisers.

Kevin Rudd's problem is not the selling of his policies. It's the policies themselves. All the evidence is that voters don't like them much. A bad idea is a bad idea, regardless of how it's packaged.

Slogans are easy, and they're popular. Eighteen months ago everyone agreed with "climate change action" and the "education revolution". The government's difficulties began when it

called the resources tax: "Bloody mad. Absolutely MAD." A re-election strategy based on having better advertising and more of it is a strategy borne of desperation. While it might have worked for Labor state premiers over the last decade it's a strategy reaching its use-by-date.

In any case, voters expect more from their prime minister than they do from their premiers. Voters at federal elections are less accommodating of the sort of cynicism often displayed by candidates at state elections.

After seeing what his state colleagues had managed to do, perhaps Kevin Rudd thought he could get away with backing down from his pledge to introduce an emissions trading scheme.

In Victoria prior to the 2002 election, Steve Bracks pledged that is new freeway in Melbourne's east would not have tolls. A year later he reneged on his commitment but it didn't seem to matter. In 2006 he was re-elected easily. Last year it took Anna Bligh only a few weeks after she was re-elected to break her pledge not to sell government assets.

Voters aren't surprised when politicians break promises. Nor should they be surprised. But Kevin Rudd promised he'd be different from other politicians.

This is potentially his most damaging broken promise. Blaming Kevin Rudd's problems on a failure to sell the message is a convenient excuse. It avoids the question of what precisely is the message to be sold.

Maybe Rudd doesn't know himself. And if he doesn't know what he stands for, it's no wonder voters don't either.

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