



## Time For Abbott To Deliver

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If 2011 was Julia Gillard's year of decision and delivery. 2012 needs to be Tony Abbott's. Here's hoping he has more success.

The opposition leader needs to decide if he is going to be a populist, political opportunist-or a leader, a genuine alternative prime minister. He then has to back his decision by delivering some genuine policy alternatives too.

Abbott need do no more than just provide an outline. Even with Andrew Wilkie fuming on the outer over pokies policy, Peter Slipper's defection to the Speaker's chair has shored up the government's position not just by giving one extra vote to Labor, but by depriving the Coalition of one too. While nothing is impossible in such a finely balanced parliament, an early election this year seems unlikely. But the sheer unpredictability of the situation-and the fact that in 18 months



an election will be due-means that Abbott needs to have clear, firm outlines put in place to show just what he stands for.

There have been some positive signs. The four principals for policy formulation set down by Andrew Robb, the man Abbott has entrusted with the task of developing his party's platform, are all encouraging: 'live within our means; back our nation's strengths; reverse the nanny state and restore a culture of personal responsibility'.

It is encouraging to have someone who knows what is politically possible in the role. Robb was the party's federal director in 1993 when the most economically liberal policy platform ever put to the Australian public failed. It is even more encouraging to have someone prepared to fire a shot across his leader's bow over policy integrity. It emerged swiftly last November that finance spokesman Robb had been excluded from the meeting where the Coalition's leadership group decided it would not oppose the government's planned increase to compulsory superannuation, despite his crucial role in the shadow ministry.

There is also cause for optimism in some of Abbott's own words. His speech to the Liberals' federal council meeting in Canberra in June last year was overshadowed by Peter Reith's dynamic but doomed bid for the party presidency, but is worth noting.

Abbott is both assiduous and conscientious. He is also an excellent writer. One afternoon in 2008 when he wandered into the press gallery after question time, clearly piqued, I suggested he turn his frustrations into an article for *The Spectator Australia*. A few hours later a polished piece appeared, but Abbott kept asking for feedback and advice and buffing away right up to deadline.

Similar work, insiders say, went into the federal council address. It was all Abbott's own.

In it he declared 'Tax cuts are in our DNA', and continued 'Real tax reform means lower, simpler fairer taxes. It doesn't mean robbing Peter to pay Paul. Real tax reform requires a more productive economy and a more frugal government which is why Labor will never deliver it.'

It still remains one of his strongest statements of intent.

There is sadly much cause for pessimism over both Abbott's and his party's stands-and those of his Coalition partners in the Nationals. Populist positioning on everything ranging from paid parental leave to industry policy, combined with a lack of economic rigour and sloppy statements on the issues of the day to the media has been disconcerting and damaged the opposition's fiscal and policy credibility. It has been suggested an Abbott government could rule by simply lurching from poor compromise to weak-willed decision in the same manner of governing that dominated too many of the Fraser years.

But if Abbott makes the principles he outlined in the federal council speech his lodestone, then what he delivers should be right for the times and the nation.