



The Liberals Need A Truth-telling Game Plan

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The challenge for Peter Dutton is to be honest with Australians about the condition of the nation and still get elected, rather than blamed.

Recently, a federal Coalition MP was contemplating the condition of the opposition one year on from the federal election. As a keen follower of sport from an AFL state, the politician described the situation in football terms. This is what the MP said.

‘We don’t really have a game plan – at best we’ve got [half of one](#). We’re afraid to take risks – they’re not. We’ve got too many passengers. We’ve got one or two impact players – they’ve got half a dozen. And somehow we think the only reason we lost last year’s grand final was because we had a bad day. But, bizarrely, we’re not completely out of it.’

In light of what we now know about what was then happening at PwC, maybe the firm’s bosses



will reflect on how maybe they should have spent less time being woke and been more awake to issues closer to home.

All of which is a fair assessment.

You don't need to be a fan of the AFL or even the NRL to understand what the MP is talking about. But, just in case, here's a translation.

Post the Turnbull/ Morrison years it's not clear what the Liberals stand for. The constant refrain "we're a broad church" doesn't answer the question, and is a way of avoiding the difficult conversation of whether the Liberals are "conservative" or "teal" or something else.

The opposition has taken some tentative steps on policy, such as encouraging a "debate" on nuclear power and, amid a housing shortage, questioning the size of the government's immigration program. But so far there's no coherent narrative about how a Liberal/National government would be different from a Labor one. Meanwhile, the Coalition remains committed to net zero. Urging the ALP not to abandon the stage three tax cuts appears to be the full extent of the Coalition's economic reform agenda.

The PM makes no secret of his ambition to change the country with all the risks for the country and his party that entails. However, the policy pronouncements of the Coalition over the last 12 months could best be described as "safe". The Liberals' decision to oppose the Voice referendum was not at all a risk. A far bigger risk would have been to support it or not take a position. That would have risked making the Liberals irrelevant to the most significant constitutional change since federation.

Most voters would struggle to name more than a handful of shadow ministers. Of itself, that is not necessarily fatal to the Coalition's electoral prospects, but it does speak to the fact some in the shadow ministry have been in parliament for decades, and to switch from football to cricket parlance, have failed to trouble the scorers.

Liberals short of impact players

The next point follows from the above. [Peter Dutton](#) and Jacinta Price can lead public debate, but it's not obvious at this stage who else in the Coalition has the ability or willingness to do so. For the government there are those such as the PM himself, Penny Wong, Jim Chalmers, Chris Bowen, Tanya Plibersek and Bill Shorten.

It's all too convenient for the Coalition to blame Scott Morrison for their election loss. As the Aston by-election result revealed, the Coalition's problems go beyond just an unpopular former leader. Leaders are important, but sustainable political success is built on policy and personnel.

For all of this, the Coalition is certainly "not out of it". Governments are invincible until they're not.



Many things brought down the person who is now Australia's ambassador to the United States, Kevin Rudd. Some of those things included overweening pride and self-confidence – in other words, hubris. If you were to look for an attitude the Rudd and Albanese governments have in common, it would be their hubris.

On the economy, energy, education, welfare and the country's sense of itself, no Coalition MP dare say in public what they utter privately. The exception to this is on defence and national security. The experiences of John Hewson's Fightback! policy package in the '90s and then, two decades later, Tony Abbott's 2014 budget, are seared into the political calculations of Coalition MPs.

Too many Coalition MPs feel it's still too early to tell Australians the truth about the condition of the nation. MPs also feel that instead of getting thanked for telling the truth, they'll be blamed for what's happened. Which, to be fair, is probably exactly what would happen.

Peter Dutton's challenge is to tell the truth and still get elected.

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