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Try to remember: when you're in opposition, it's not about you anymore.

If you don't understand the GST, don't vote for it.'

That was Paul Keating's message days out from the 1993 election. It helped turn the poll around. Like all successful political lines, it was both shorthand and subliminal.

What Keating really was saying was: 'If you don't know what the other mob's policies mean for you, if you're at all unsure, then stick with me.' 'Better the devil you know' is a saying we hear very early on in life.

We all understand what it means—it's a simple, cut-through line.

It's a pity that the federal Liberal Party hasn't been able to develop a line in response to Kevin Rudd's proposed emissions trading program, the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

This isn't an article on the science of climate change. It isn't an article on the economics of emissions trading. It's about politics, about the federal coalition's inability to respond to that one proposal of the government. They got confused over the matter at hand.

It's easy to understand why people might be climate change sceptics. Given some scientific forecasts of the past five years or so, it's a miracle that more of us haven't been carried off by the H5N1 bird flu or succumbed to SARS. Not only did we survive the new ice age first spotted in the early seventies, we didn't even notice a chill in the air.

The mass starvations in developed countries that were forecast for that decade and the coming years have never eventuated. Instead, we're warned over and over nowadays of the threats of an obesity epidemic.

And that quaint little period piece from the same time—the Club of Rome's ominous report *The Limits of Growth*—seems to have been just a little out in its prediction that oil, gold, zinc, tin, copper and natural gas would be completely exhausted in 1992.

But climate change wasn't being discussed here. Instead, one precise policy proposal to tackle the matter was on the table. Or worse, one *imprecise* policy proposal.

It is this that makes the Liberal Party's feat in turning itself and its response into the issue so absolutely unforgiveable.

Labor's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme green paper was launched at the start of July with all the hoopla usually associated with a federal budget.

There was a lock-up for media, another one for interest groups, briefings for the opposition and minor parties followed by the minister's speech.

One thing, though, that we tend to associate with budgets was missing. Figures. The government's green paper might have run to 600 pages, but it did not contain vital information about targets for greenhouse gas reductions or the potential economic costs of its proposed course of action. Treasury modelling had not been finished.

Indeed, in a triumph for bureaucracy, the modelling will not be available until October—even though public submissions on the green paper close in the second week of September.

Cheques are very useful things, but we rarely make one out, add our signature and then pass it on to the payee without putting in an amount.

The opposition didn't need to sign a blank cheque on this occasion. But before Brendan Nelson could say that much, his colleagues were already squabbling about broader matters.

The hapless Liberal leader tried. 'The coalition welcomes the release of the green paper because it finally reveals the government's thinking on an Emissions Trading Scheme,' Nelson said in a statement. '...there is a lot at stake for our environment, our economy and for all Australians. Mr Rudd is asking Australians to take

him on trust—that he will compensate households and business for the impact of his new taxes and will get the details right.'

Nelson floated the fundamental political problems of the proposal straight away: 'Mr Rudd and the Labor Party are proposing a new tax on petrol—but not until after the election. Indeed, Senator Wong confirmed at the Press Club today that she was "giving Australians notice" that they should prepare for higher petrol prices... According to the green paper, electricity is set to rise in price by up to 16 per cent. The government should therefore release its modelling of cost rises well before responses to the green paper are due. The public has a right to know the costs of any system if they are to make informed submissions on the cost of living.'

Nelson was absolutely right. An emissions trading scheme will create a cost that will have some sort of an impact on every household and every business in Australia. It will create a cost—an additional cost—in highly uncertain economic times.

Not that the message got through. Instead, the biggest story was Liberal division. It may be that the Australian public are prepared to pay the costs of an emissions trading scheme. It may be that they think the environment is that important. What is more likely is that the Liberals have completely bugged up their first big policy test since they found themselves in opposition.

They have managed to turn the detail of their response to a government proposal that lacked crucial detail in the first place into the story.

Some of this has been the result of malice. Most has been due to sheer incompetence.

They're the opposition. It's not all about them anymore.

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