



CHRISTIAN KERR

There are few easier stories to report than a change of government.

Attraction is bound to wane if it is based on who you aren't, not who you are. And so it has been with the affair between Kevin Rudd and the Canberra Press Gallery.

Former Liberal leader Brendan Nelson had a go at analysing it all when he appeared on ABC Radio's *Sunday Profile* at the end of last month.

[T]here are people in the media who barely conceal their political petticoat who were, I think, looking forward to the Liberal Party being opposition.'

As ever, the poor bloke got it wrong. Not altogether wrong, but wrong enough.

No doubt there were plenty of people in the media who wanted a change of government. But the vast majority of these wanted it because they were lazy, not because they were politically partisan.

They wanted a change of government because they wanted what journalists always want: a good, big, meaty—and easy—story. And there are few easier stories to report than a change of government.

John Howard could have given them a biggie of his own, a change of Prime Minister. He made his judgement and paid the price—and made his party cough up quite a bit more.

Rudd's narrow election win suggests putting Peter Costello in the Lodge may have satisfied voters almost as much as it would have satisfied the media, but it didn't happen.

So throughout last year journalists turned their attention to Rudd.

The rising star from Queensland had always courted the media. He was always available. It was his mobile number, not a minder's number, that appeared at the bottom of his media releases.

Rudd worked the media and gave them what they wanted—good stories and good comments.

He was lucky, of course. Luck always plays a part in political success. Rudd was the opposition spokesman on foreign affairs when the story of the AWB Iraqi bribes broke in 2005.

It was a very good story and Rudd provided very good talent. The incisive former diplomat came presented well. His profile soared.

His party saw what was going on. They saw Rudd connecting with ordinary voters. They also noticed the very fine line he was managing to walk as he criticised the nature of Australia's engagement with Iraq without criticising the engagement in itself.

Here was a man with obvious appeal to soft Green voters put off by Bomber Beazley. By the end of 2006 Rudd was Labor leader. His timing could not have been better. The honeymoon segued into an extended election campaign. His win gave him a second honeymoon. And the media lapped it all up. A nice, good, easy story. Many must have felt Rudd was their man.

In March last year, though, Fairfax writer Kerry-Anne Walsh saw a very different side of the Labor leader.

She had a story ready to go that questioned Rudd's account of the events that followed the death of his father, Bert, when he was 11.

Team Rudd was unimpressed. His chief media adviser Lachlan Harris warned Walsh that if the story went to press 'We'll have 100 people ready to roll tomorrow morning to trash you and your paper.'

It did. Later. And after many more similar phone calls involving Walsh, her

editor, Rudd's staff and Rudd himself.

'Kevin Rudd has a dangerously glass jaw,' Walsh's famously cranky colleague Alan Ramsey concluded in an account of it all at the end of the month.

There's more than that. Rudd's media team have engaged in blatant manipulation of the media all this year. The media have mainly had to go along with it—not from bias but so they can do their job and deliver the news to the public.

That is what journalists always try to do. Now, they are fighting the government's efforts to stand in their way.

A flood of stories in the past few weeks have highlighted government efforts to track down the sources of recent information leaks.

Some of these have involved national security matters. Others haven't—like the raid by six Federal Police officers on the Gold Coast home of a person suspected of leaking documents warning some rural Australians might lose their TV signals when analogue TV is switched off.

Some media fell in love with Kevin Rudd because he wasn't John Howard.

Now they are realising exactly what he is—Australia's Chief Bureaucrat. We are witnessing the end of the affair.

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