The post-hope Prime Minister

The electorate no longer trusts the high-handed rhetoric of Kevin Rudd and Barack Obama, writes Tony Barry.

President Obama and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd both catapulted to power principally by harnessing the politics of hope. But, as recent events have shown, in politics, hope can turn to hopeless pretty quickly.

Politicians who try to tap into the hopes and dreams of an electorate are playing a high stakes game. It’s a lesson that Julia Gillard appears to have learnt.

In the politics of hope, disillusioned voters convert their personal wants and transpose it onto a political candidate. The candidate then becomes a reflection of how those voters want to feel about themselves and their nation, as long as the candidate talks to a broad issue framework that is consistent with voter concerns.

Because in the politics of hope, dreams are more important than detailed policy prescriptions and imagination will always trump complexity.

President Obama is the gold standard when it comes to playing the politics of hope. In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama wrote: ‘I am new enough on the national political scene to serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.’

There’s nothing new about using hope in politics. Lynton Crosby, one of the Liberal Party’s most successful and brilliant strategists, is fond of repeating the dictum that in politics when reason and emotion collide, emotion always wins.

That’s a simple way of saying that the perceptions, expectations and beliefs that drive the decision-making behaviour of voters have both rational and emotional components. This complex set of rational and emotional perceptions are linked by a network of connections including a functional component. For every rational thought, there is a functional element and connecting emotions and values.

For instance, desire for a strong national economy is a rational argument, but few people are excited by positive national accounts figures or growing terms of trade. But what does motivate people is the functional element of a strong national economy and its terminal value (driving emotion). For example, for some people, the functional dimension of a strong national economy is low unemployment. The terminal value (or emotion) of that path, depending on the particular person, might be personal security, peace of mind or pride.

In other words, when the reason (strong national accounts figures) is stacked up against the terminal value (the sense of personal security or pride of having a job), the emotional component, being personal security or pride, will always win.

That’s why playing the hope card is such a temptation for political leaders—if they can.

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The 2010 federal election will be remembered for the complete lack of hope being offered to the electorate.

offer voters the blank projection screen that Obama wrote of, the emotive forces of hope are so strong that it alone can overcome almost any rational argument.

Take Kevin Rudd in the lead up to the 2007 federal election.

Most elections are decided by so-called retail politics, where voters decide which party is making the better offering on issues that are personally relevant to them.

But in 2006, Kevin Rudd and the Labor machine recognised that some swing voters were looking beyond economic management. Confident that the economy would continue to perform strongly no matter who was in government, swing voters were vulnerable to the Siren call of a political leader selling hope.

That sense of giving the electorate hope was a recurring theme through all of Labor’s pre-positioning in 2007. In April of that year at his first Labor National Conference as Leader, Kevin Rudd opened his address by being a projection screen for people’s hopes: ‘My name is Kevin, I’m from Queensland and I’m here to help.’

But the problem with playing the politics of hope is that it sows the seeds of its own destruction.

In politics, the terminal value of hope has a short shelf-life—hope is a fleeting and unsustainable emotion. Kevin Rudd had summed himself up to the electorate before he was even elected. And after he was elected, and when it became clear to the electorate that he had failed to meet those hopes and expectations, the public sentiment was swift and unforgiving.

One of several fatal mistakes by Kevin Rudd was in the lead up to Copenhagen. Instead of diluting people’s expectations (and hopes) of what was actually achievable, Rudd continued to deliver strong sounding messages that dealing with climate change was the great moral challenge of our time. And of course, when he not only failed to deliver an ETS but then, spooked by the sharpened attacks of Tony Abbott, delayed its introduction, it sent a signal to voters that the hope Kevin Rudd offered was only illusory.

Similarly, Kevin Rudd’s apology to the stolen generation was a very powerful symbol of hope. Unfortunately, as voters concluded shortly after, the apology was pure aesthetics – it tapped into our hopes that the lives of Indigenous Australians would be improved, but in real terms there has sadly been no noticeable, functional improvement.

Though President Obama has to date avoided the sort of humiliation suffered by Kevin Rudd, the published opinion polls are already pointing to a challenging political environment for Obama in the mid-terms and his re-election in 2012.

It’s a theme that former Vice Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, recently captured at the first-ever National Tea Party Convention when she delivered the devastating line: ‘This was all part of that hope and change and transparency. Now, a year later, I gotta ask the supporters of all that, “How’s that hopey, changey stuff working out?”’

This is not to suggest that President Obama’s political situation is in any way terminal. Unlike Kevin Rudd, Obama can at least point to his attempts to work through policy outcomes and can at least in part blame his opponents for the failure of his health reforms. But Rudd and Labor had no such excuse. Their attempts to blame the Opposition and the Greens for failing to deliver on climate change were simply not credible, because they had a choice—give in or stick to their guns and get a mandate at an election. They failed to deliver and then to further reinforce their problems they crumbled and showed that consideration of their re-election prospects was more important than achieving the things they were elected to do.

Of course, some politicians don’t give in to the temptation of playing the hope card. Peter Costello gave many great speeches in his career, but few better than his address at the Sir Henry Bolte Lecture in August 2001. In that speech, Costello effectively rejected the false promise of the politics of hope:

At this point somebody is going to ask, ‘Well—what is the government going to do about that?’ And here lies one of our biggest problems. The expectation that the government should solve all of our problems or can solve all of our problems is a big problem. I think there has been a tendency for government to encourage the belief that it can solve any kind of problem. This inevitably leads to disappointment.

If there is one thing that the 2010 federal election will be remembered for, it is a complete lack of hope being offered to the electorate. As Prime Minister, Julia Gillard has quickly moved away from Kevin Rudd’s habit of being big on concepts but small on detail. Indeed, the vacuum created by the lack of thought leadership in the 2010 federal election has turned contest into a consideration of personalities.

Julia Gillard appears to recognise the strategic pitfalls in using the emotion of hope as a tactical device, instead recognising that when it comes to politics lofty ideals and rhetoric are limited in its application. The danger for Gillard is that if she fails to produce erudite policies that genuinely attempt to tackle the concerns of voters, she will be judged by the electorate as neither offering hope nor ideas.