

Health-care woes leave Obama down in the dumps

Disillusioned US voters are poised to punish the President, **RUPERT CORNWELL** writes

What went wrong? In January 2009, Barack Obama took power in a nation that overwhelmingly yearned for him to succeed. He was a fresh face, eloquent, thoughtful, plainly intelligent. On Capitol Hill, his party had massive majorities. All of that remains true. Yet, just 13 months later, the United States is in about as foul a mood as when George W. Bush reached his nadir.

Most parties that win the White House lose seats at the next mid-term elections. This November though, Democrats are bracing for a wipe-out that could conceivably see them lose control of both House and Senate, as the independent voters who, in November 2008, bought Obama's message of change and renewal abandon him in disillusioned droves.

The man they thought was an outsider has behaved like the quintessential insider. He and his Administration talk tough about Wall Street, but after their near-death experience the banks are paying bonuses as they did in the locust years. Instead of bringing a fresh broom to Washington, DC, Obama has deferred to the crusty old barons of Congress. He promised a new era

of unity. Instead, the system is so gridlocked by partisanship that some call the country ungovernable. And then there's the health-care morass.

Obama has now brought together Democrats and Republicans for a televised "summit" in a last bid to rescue his signature initiative that after nine months was about to cross the finish line – until the Democrats contrived to lose Ted Kennedy's former seat in Massachusetts, and with it the 60th Senate vote that would have enabled them to break a Republican filibuster.

The calculations underlying this event are far too complex to go into here.

An ever more confused American public no longer knows what it wants.

The Republicans will play nice to the national viewing audience to show they're not bloody-minded obstructionists. In reality, they have no incentive to compromise now. The Democrats will also be on their best behaviour, even as they plot to ram through a final version of the bill over Republican objections, using a procedural manoeuvre that requires

just 51 Senate votes, not 60, for passage.

Whether they can pull it off is anyone's guess, but for Obama the gamble is huge. Having invested so much in health-care reform, he cannot walk away now. Yet after a while persistence starts looking like a political obsession to match Captain Ahab's hunt for the great white whale. Moby Dick, of course, hauled Ahab to his death, and health care could easily drag Obama to disaster.

One thing, however, is that Obama is likely to be at his best for this event: master of ceremonies and master of his brief, thinking on his feet and arguing his case with a cogency and reasonableness no other US politician, with the possible exception of Bill Clinton, can match.

Obama did it a few weeks ago at an unscripted televised encounter with Republican congressmen, which had jaundiced commentators fed up with the lifeless rituals of American politics talking about an American version of a prime minister's question time.

However, the big lesson of the Obama presidency thus far is the

opposite. Intelligence, eloquence and sweet reason alone are not enough in politics.

Yes, it seemed that way to voters when they chose a successor to the dogmatic, tongue-tied and defiantly anti-intellectual Bush. Obama was the most politically inexperienced person to become president in a century, but in 2008, a majority of Americans either overlooked that fact or saw it as a positive virtue. Obama, they thought, would summon what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature".

In fact another Illinois politician, former governor Adlai Stevenson, hit the nail on the head, more than half a century ago. Like Obama, Stevenson ran for president (twice, both times unsuccessfully). Like Obama, he was highly intelligent and rather cerebral. He was also very witty. "You have the vote of every thinking person," a woman supporter called out during Stevenson's 1956 campaign. To which he replied, "that's not enough, madam, we need a majority".

Now Obama is on the verge of

losing that majority, if he hasn't lost it already. When an administration is struggling, the pundits' advice machine moves into overdrive. The current wisdom is that Obama must broaden his circle of close advisers beyond a "Chicago mafia" at the White House, and maybe jettison Rahm Emanuel, his foul-mouthed White House Chief of Staff.

That the infighting is seriously under way was proved by a recent column in *The Washington Post*, surely inspired, if not leaked, by Emanuel or his allies, arguing that Obama's mistake had been to ignore his top aide's advice on key issues, and that Emanuel was the one reason Obama's presidency hadn't already gone the way of Jimmy Carter's.

When such pieces start appearing, you know a president's in trouble. But the person who probably needs to change is the boss. Events have proved Stevenson right, that reason and intelligence take you only so far in politics. Obama cannot be accused of masking the truth about America's financial and economic situation. Nor does he fail to make the case for sacrifice.

But he rarely demands sacrifice directly. Take health care. To win agreement, Obama now proposes that a crucial revenue-raising provision, a tax on higher-end employer-sponsored schemes is now being deferred to 2018, long after he leaves office. Such moves only reinforce a feeling that Obama is a soft touch.

Which in turn suggests a second truth. When times are tough, successful leaders must not only be liked. They must also be feared. No one fears Obama, in part because he hasn't faced anyone down, least of all the Congress that is now supreme emblem of everything the public thinks is wrong with the system.

It's not yet too late; Obama is far more popular than the Congress. There are parallels too with the early stages of Clinton's presidency.

Clinton also failed to push through sweeping health-care reform. After a crushing mid-term defeat in 1994, he changed tack and went for smaller changes. These now add up to a decent legacy.

But the 2010s are not the 1990s. Big things need to be done, and Americans instinctively knew that when they voted Obama into office. Thus far, he hasn't delivered.

Independent

Sense needed to tackle N-waste

NATALIE WASLEY and JIM GREEN

Federal Resources Minister Martin Ferguson announced on Tuesday that he intends to pursue plans for a national radioactive waste repository at Muckaty, 120km north of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory. It wasn't until the following day that he announced his intention to give himself sweeping powers to override state and territory laws and bypass federal environmental and Aboriginal heritage laws.

Ferguson asserted that he was restoring "fairness" to the difficult issue of managing Australia's radioactive waste. Elements of the minister's announcement do just that – in particular the repeal of the 2005-06 Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Act, which permitted the imposition of a dump in the absence of consultation with or consent by traditional owners.

However, the minister's new legislation entrenches another unfair process which began under the Howard government. Section 11 of the National Radioactive Waste Management Bill 2010 gives the minister the power to override any and all state/territory laws which might impede his nuclear waste dump plans. The bill also allows the minister to override the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 in relation to site selection.

Ferguson is pursuing an approach scarcely less draconian than the Howard government's. It is an authoritarian approach, not a fair or democratic one.

Ferguson falsely claims that Ngapa traditional owners support the nomination of the Muckaty site. He well knows that many of them oppose the dump – as well as numerous requests for meetings, he received a letter opposing the dump in May 2009 signed by 25 Ngapa traditional owners and 32 traditional owners from other Muckaty groups. When quizzed about the letter on ABC Radio on Tuesday, Ferguson quickly changed the topic.

Ferguson is also well aware of the unanimous resolution passed by the NT Labor Conference in April 2008 which called on the Federal Government to exclude Muckaty on the grounds that the nomination "was not made with the full and informed consent of all Traditional Owners and affected people and as such does not comply with the Aboriginal Land Rights Act".

And Ferguson knows that fellow ministers Jenny Macklin, Kim Carr, Peter Garrett and Warren Snowdon, among others, have acknowledged the distress and opposition of many Muckaty traditional owners.

Traditional owners opposed to the dump will continue fighting to keep their country clean. Muckaty traditional owner Dianne Stokes has been speaking against the proposal since its inception. "We have been writing letters to the government body, signed by the traditional owners. We have been asking for someone to come and sit with us so that we can talk to them face-to-face. We want to keep talking about it and continue to fight it until we are listened to. The big capital NO."

How should we handle the contentious issues surrounding nuclear waste? A little common sense wouldn't go astray. Firstly, it needs to be shown that radioactive waste is not being produced unnecessarily. Since the Lucas Heights research reactor is the major source of the waste in question, a government serious about waste minimisation would be exploring non-reactor options for medical and scientific applications.

Another sensible minimisation strategy would be to curb the profit-driven overuse of diagnostic imaging technologies in private medical practices.

Secondly, all options for radioactive waste management need to be considered – not just "remote" repositories (always more remote for some people than for others). This includes the option of ongoing storage at the Lucas Heights site, which is operated by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation. All relevant organisations have acknowledged that this is a viable option – even Ferguson's own department.

Requiring ANSTO to store its own waste is the best – and perhaps the only – way of focussing the organisation's mind on the importance of waste minimisation principles. Thirdly, if a site selection process is required, it ought to be based on scientific and environmental criteria, as well as on the principle of voluntarism. When the federal Bureau of Resource Sciences conducted a national repository site selection study in the 1990s, the Muckaty area did not even make the short-list as a "suitable" site.

Natalie Wasley is a campaigner with the Arid Lands Environment Centre in Alice Springs. Dr Jim Green is the national nuclear campaigner with Friends of the Earth.

'Sleepers' put Rudd at risk

After the insulation scheme fiasco, Labor looks vulnerable to grass-roots campaigns that play on the Government's perceived weaknesses.



The Rudd Government is in full-blown crisis mode over the insulation fiasco and just one small step from panic.

That became clear yesterday when the Prime Minister went on a radio blitz and then called a snap caucus meeting for the extraordinary and sole purpose of giving a line of propaganda to his team. Just to be sure they sing off the same hymn sheet, Labor MPs and Senators will be given an "information pack" with facts and figures to try to convince wavering voters that the Government is actually doing something.

By then Parliament House was crackling with talk about the shellacking the PM received from the radio interviews. Neil Mitchell tore into the PM on behalf of his Melbourne listeners when Rudd said "there have been problems with the implementation of this. I accept that."

Mitchell: "Problems? We've got four people dead. We've got old ladies ringing in tears now, because they're frightened. We've got houses burning down. This is – Prime Minister, this is the biggest disaster to reach into people's homes from government in a long time."

That's the sort of talk that gives Labor MPs palpitations. And that's the reason their leader is working even more furiously than usual, trying to repair the political damage caused by the badly run insulation program.

Tony Abbott went to Fyshwick yesterday to say this row is far from over, and while it looks as though Peter Garrett will remain on the front bench, his credibility is badly dented. It's the perception that matters – it wasn't his fault that installers died but it happened under his watch in a program that was badly managed. We know it was a dud because the program was axed.

But another, quiet development on Wednesday will be worrying the PM a great deal. That's because one of the worst fears of a political leader is a viral campaign that takes hold and runs beneath their radar, doing a lot of damage.



The Liberal Party has proved itself more willing and more adept at character assassination through whispering campaigns against Labor leaders. Liberals were therefore shocked when the ACTU began a not-so-subtle campaign against John Howard's decision to strip penalty rates from the very workers he had embraced – and tagged – as his "battlers". The union movement plastered the country with posters that had a drawing of a bin and urged voters to put Howard's laws "where they belong". It hit hard. One faded relic of that campaign lingers at the traffic lights at Dickson.

Two days ago the Liberal Party's

chief strategist, Brian Loughnane, intensified a viral campaign against Kevin Rudd based on his political weakness by printing posters with an unflattering photo of the Prime Minister, open-mouthed, emblazoned with, "Blah! Blah! Blah!" and "All talk, no action".

The poster has sprouted in the windows of Liberals' offices, shouting the message into the otherwise quiet and always neat corridors of Parliament House. It's a message that Tony Abbott gave to his troops at their weekly pep talk, and they will take it to their electorates this weekend.

This is a powerful reminder of the

campaign theme that Rudd is weak while Abbott is strong and active. One might be in charge of running the country, but hey, the other rides a bike.

In Rudd's first year he established a gazillion inquiries, creating the image of a PM who was too cautious to do anything. Now he must act to reverse the image before the damage builds too far, but, as others have found, a viral campaign cannot be easily corralled, if at all.

The Opposition claims Rudd has never taken a hard decision. Well, that's plainly wrong – he broke his pledge to be a fiscal conservative when he emptied Treasury to fight

the economic slowdown, and he broke an election promise by imposing a means test on the private health insurance rebate. Now he is complaining the Opposition has dug a \$2 billion hole in his budget by blocking his legislation. That is, Labor is trying to turn the broken promise into a virtue by saying that the huge blow to the budget from the global financial crisis justifies tough decisions. But no matter how many times Rudd says Abbott is protecting high-income earners, many voters simply won't forget or forgive the broken promise.

Today Rudd is in action in Sydney, where he is due to officially open the

Australia has draconian security laws, but the risk is negligible, **CHRIS MICHAELSEN** writes

On Tuesday the Rudd Government released its long awaited Counter-Terrorism White Paper.

The white paper forms part of the Government's national security reform agenda and sets out its counter-terrorism strategy and efforts.

It replaces the Howard government's white paper, which drew heavily on the rhetoric of the Bush administration. Launching the previous white paper in 2004, then foreign minister Alexander Downer proclaimed that Australia was engaged in a "struggle to the death over values" against "Islamofascists" who were "convinced that their destiny was to overshadow the democratic West" and who had embarked on a ruthless mission to "destroy our society by waging a version of total war".

To its credit, the new white paper largely refrains from such colourful rhetoric. Nonetheless, its underlying message is much the same: the terrorist threat has become a persistent and permanent feature of Australia's security environment and an attack "could occur at any time". To underscore this assessment, it claims that "numerous" terrorist attacks have been thwarted. And it argues that the significance of the

threat is also highlighted by the fact that 20 people have so far been convicted of terrorism offences under the Criminal Code.

What the white paper fails to acknowledge is that none of those 20 people were charged for actually engaging in a terrorist act. Instead, all defendants were convicted of so-called ancillary offences which were enacted as part of extremely broad anti-terrorism laws introduced in the wake of the 9/11 and Bali attacks. More importantly, however, the white paper fails to tell the public that the chances of getting killed in a terrorist attack in Australia are close to zero. Indeed, in comparison to other risks, terrorism is a triviality.

For instance, compare terrorism-related fatalities to fatalities totally unrelated to terrorism. Figures from United States show that terrorism there poses a far lesser statistical threat to life than most other activities. While 1440 US citizens died in terrorist attacks in 2001, three times as many died of malnutrition, and almost 40 times as many people died in car accidents that same year.

Even with the 9/11 attacks included in the count, the number of

Americans killed by terrorism since the late 1960s is about the same as the number of Americans killed over the same period by severe allergic reaction to peanuts, lightning, bee stings, or accident-causing deer. The number of annual deaths from sports utility vehicles is greater than the total number of deaths caused by all terrorist acts combined.

At the global level, statistics are equally revealing. Anthony Cordesman from the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies and the RAND Corporation's Brian Jenkins have independently provided lists of violence committed by Islamist militants outside such war zones as Iraq, Israel, Chechnya, Sudan, Kashmir and Afghanistan, whether perpetrated by domestic terrorists or by ones with substantial international connections.

Included in the count are attacks such as those that occurred in Bali in 2002, in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Turkey in 2003, in the Philippines, Madrid, and Egypt in 2004, and in London and Jordan in 2005. The lists include not only attacks by Al Qaeda, but also those by its imitators,

enthusiasts, and wannabes as well as by groups with no apparent connection to it whatever. The total of people killed in the five years after 9/11 in such incidents came to around 200-300 per year. By comparison, over the same period, far more people have perished in the US alone in bathtub drownings.

In Australia the statistics tell a similar story. To date, not a single person has been killed in a terrorist attack on Australian soil in the post-9/11 era. Around 100 Australians have died in terrorist attacks overseas, most of them in the Bali bombings of October 2002.

A calculation of annual fatality risks for the period of 1970-2007 reveals that the risk of getting killed in a terrorist attack in Australia is 1 in 33,300,000. Even with the Bali bombings included, the fatality risk stands at 1 in 7,100,000. By comparison, the risk of getting killed in a traffic accident amounts to 1 in 15,000. Yet many Australian highways remain in a shocking condition.

The Government's response to terrorism, on the other hand, has been gigantic. Since 2001 Australia's

total defence spending has increased 59 per cent, from \$13.7 billion to \$21.8 billion. More than \$16 billion has been spent in extra defence, counter-terrorism and foreign aid by 2010-11. Over the same period, ASIO's budget has increased by 655 per cent, the Australian Federal Police budget by 161 per cent, ASIS by 236 per cent and the Office of National Assessments by 441 per cent. Most recently, the Government has announced a \$200 million package of aviation security measures to better protect our air transport system from terrorist attack. And the white paper provides \$69 million for introducing biometric-based visa systems to reduce the risk of terrorists, criminals and other persons of concern entering Australia undetected.

The legislative response has been unprecedented, too. Parliament has enacted more than 40 pieces of "security legislation" since 9/11 which ensure that Australia has some of the most draconian anti-terrorism laws in the Western world. In contrast to the US, Britain and Canada, Australia's domestic intelligence agency, ASIO, was given

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