

For Tony Abbott, now everything is about leadership

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Margie and Tony Abbott arrive at the National Press Club on Monday. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

My experience of the John Howard versus Andrew Peacock contest in the 1980s is that once the genie of leadership contest is out of the bottle, it is hard to put it back. You only need one or two backbenchers to wander through the press gallery with a titbit of leadership distraction and the issue will rumble on for months.

Leadership contests are debilitating. Once the leadership is in play everything that happens in the party or government from then on will be assessed through the prism of leadership. Tony Abbott made it very clear on Monday that he will not be going quietly so the party room critics can forget the hope of an easy switch.

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Abbott suggests he was elected by the people and so he can't be challenged. This is not the approach in Australia or at Westminster and Abbott will be making a mistake if he continues to tell the party room he is immune to party authority. Admittedly an appeal over the heads of the people is not unknown but it's not worth much unless the PM has strong public support.

Abbott's critics will surely be whispering that the public will be relieved by his departure, while some cabinet ministers will be saying Abbott has been more of a hindrance rather than being the PM who makes the cabinet ministers look good as he claimed last weekend.

His best appeal is to rely on his commitment to manage the budget. It is his strongest card because there is no doubt that despite it being said that the government has not sold its reforms well, the truth is that the Senate has made it hard to push through reforms that are necessary.

My guess is that Abbott's leadership will continue to be under scrutiny and that the end game – one way or another – is still in play, subject to events and the polls. There are still some big problems in his policy list.

The abandonment of the paid parental leave policy will take some of the sting out of the current backbench worries about losing their seats a la Queensland. It was wrong in principle for numerous reasons and to keep pushing it until his leadership was actually under threat was a very bad look. To have to push the PM to the brink will not be forgotten. And until we know if he is still going to impose more tax on the business community and we can see the proposal in detail, the saga of the PPL is still not quite over.

I presume he did not drop some of his other problems until he had a meeting of cabinet colleagues. Peta Credlin should not be at that meeting. Abbott has delegated his authority to her and I don't think it's fair to criticise her for her actions. But despite that, she has become part of Abbott's problems and he should give her another job outside of the PM's office.

There should be no change to the pension index because it could cost the government a lot of votes. I never agreed to the index change under the Howard years but it's crazy brave to put hundreds of thousands of pensioners and their family off-side politically.

I still don't understand why Abbott says he wants a discussion about the GST, but nothing will be done unless everyone agrees to GST reform – including Bill Shorten. There is no way that Shorten will agree to a change to the GST design so why leave the door open? The GST was an issue in the Queensland election and it will remain a problem while Abbott keeps it alive as an issue.

Abbott will keep knights and dames under the auspice of an independent committee. OK, that is better than Abbott's "captain's pick" but Australians do not want a return to knights and dames and it will be a continuing thorn in the side of the government. It should be dropped altogether. It is not worth the trouble. It has caused enough already. The sooner the whole unfortunate saga is permanently buried the better.

Then there is the question of trust. Two matters were raised. Abbott was pinged in question time at the Press Club on Monday when his promise of a more collegiate and consultative government was undermined by the evidence produced that he has made that same promise 12 to 15 times since 2009. Only time will resolve that promise. Abbott also said, in regards to the knights and the dames, "these are the two 'captain's calls' I've made". Actually there has been more than those two, including his support of Labor's local government referendum.

Clearly some backbenchers and maybe some frontbenchers have had enough. There are no rules and no certainty about leadership contests so we can only wait for events to unfold. Peter Reith was a Howard government minister and is a Fairfax columnist.