

Shorten risks causing the greatest havoc by sticking by his promises



Bill Shorten at the Labor Party national conference in Adelaide this month.

Chris Kenny, Associate Editor, 8:46AM December 29, 2018

Bill Shorten is in the stands, pads and gloves on, feeling fresh, bat in hand; he is Australia's next man in.

Politics, like cricket, is always capable of surprises, and while the Canberra pitch has been playing like a green top rather than the flat track of Shorten's hometown MCG, only a record-breaking Coalition fightback will keep the Labor Party leader from the crease.

What sort of a prime minister would Shorten be? What sort of a government would he lead? Would a switch to Shorten Labor "change the country", as Paul Keating once unsuccessfully warned about changing governments?

The Coalition seems eager to find out, still doing all it can to smooth the path to a Labor victory. Just this week we have seen former Liberal MP Julia Banks doing her best to sabotage the party that put her into parliament.

A leading Malcontent, Banks has attempted to claim the simultaneous status of sexism victim and feminist hero with a glossy spread in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, attacking her former party. Banks is still seeking to portray

the downfall of prime minister Malcolm Turnbull and the leadership failure of Julie Bishop as some kind of misogynistic coup.

The only thing missing from her tale of sexist bullying is any details, evidence or examples of sexism or bullying. She has never been interrogated on these issues and offers up only anecdotes about the tough and testy cut and thrust of internal lobbying during a leadership spill.

Banks rightly wants more women in politics yet spits the dummy and slurs all her factional opponents and former governmental colleagues, male and female, without substantiation. She wants higher standards in politics yet betrays the voters who elected her under the Liberal Party banner.

On the other side of the factional divide, if not the gender divide, conservative Liberal senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells was attacking Scott Morrison's initiative in establishing a Pacific infrastructure bank. While the former minister for international development and the Pacific was raising a worthwhile policy point about not exacerbating debt problems for Pacific nations, it is impossible to divorce her intervention from internal ructions.

The minister overseeing these matters now is leading moderate Marise Payne, the Foreign Minister. Payne has been almost entirely absent from public debate over difficult controversies in her portfolio such as the Jerusalem embassy debate, Chinese strategic aggression and Donald Trump's Middle East withdrawals.

She has saved her media enthusiasm for the low-hanging fruit of bashing Japan over whaling. A Foreign Minister who seldom subjects herself to questions from journalists has been happy to slap down one of our leading trade and strategic partners over an issue that is linked only tangentially to our interests.

At some stage the Coalition might realise that the way to impress mainstream voters was not through the conceits of pretending to save the whales or fantasising about saving the planet — this would please Twitter and the ABC but not win back mainstream voters.

Government MPs might realise the way to win back the respect of voters was not to fight the conservatives in Liberal ranks or the so-called moderates either. The way to impress voters might be to fight for their interests and their priorities. Could it be that obvious?

Regardless, largely because of these misguided shenanigans on the Coalition side, we are likely to discover the character of a Shorten government less than halfway through the footy season. We should hope that Keating was wrong and a change of government doesn't alter the country too much.

The Canberra press gallery and media-political class tend to betray their green-left bent and messiah complex by anointing every Labor leader as the next big thing. Kim Beazley, Simon Crean, Mark Latham, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard were all going to shake up the nation for the better, apparently. None of them did.

Perhaps the most encouraging portent for Shorten is that the commentariat is less ebullient about him than they were for Latham, Rudd or Gillard. The gallery loves the "vision thing" and craves charisma, and Shorten is a little less woke, a more mundane saviour, in the vein of Beazley or Crean, who were both sensible but lacked cut-through.

Shorten has proved to be a disciplined campaigner and pragmatic leader who operates within the confines of ALP orthodoxies. As a union man — a machine man — he is unlikely to run his own race in the way Rudd did, to the great detriment of his party, the nation and his own career. Under Shorten it is hard to imagine we would see the perpetual personal indulgence of Rudd: the 2020 ideas summit; the bizarre essay decrying capitalism; the moral crusade over climate change; the grandiose and counter-productive diplomatic flourishes such as lecturing the Chinese, in China, in Mandarin; and, most damaging, the panicked, overblown and mismanaged stimulus response to the global financial crisis.

Rather, as prime minister, we might expect Shorten to subject his every decision for the approval of cabinet, caucus, the ALP national executive and his old comrades at the ACTU. The policy implications of this might not be reassuring but it should make him steadier — less mercurial — than Rudd.

This points to the core concern with Shorten — and it provides a complete contrast to the flaws we saw from his recent Labor and Liberal predecessors. Rudd, Gillard and Tony Abbott undercut their standing by breaking promises: Rudd promised to be an economic conservative but was the opposite; Gillard specifically ruled out a carbon tax, then snuck one in; Abbott promised to keep his promises, then broke his word, including by increasing personal income tax.

By contrast, Shorten could wreak the most havoc by keeping his promises. He deserves credit for being upfront and honest about his intentions to increase taxes, increase spending and enact energy policies that will put upward pressure on energy prices (even if he does not concede this point), but the prescription could be highly damaging.

While voters are crying out for governments and leaders who are as good as their word, as prime minister it would be best if the former union leader pulled back on his more worrying ambitions. Just as the nation enters its first year of having the budget back in the black, Shorten's spending plans would jeopardise the surplus. Just as the nation was set on a path of lower taxes for personal incomes and companies, Shorten Labor would increase taxes on housing investment, personal incomes and retirement income.

Just as the nation was realising the primacy of reliability and affordability in the electricity market, Shorten Labor would double down on the climate-driven, subsidised renewable energy crusade, creating more uncertainty and - increasing price pressures but doing nothing for the planet as global emissions continue to rise.

An increase in labour market regulation, reversal of weekend penalty rate reductions and reintroduction of sector-wide industrial bargaining could hamper investment and dampen jobs growth. A union movement veto on major economic decisions could entrench a retreat from three decades of economic reform, dating from the Hawke-Keating Labor years.

Overall, we might see a sclerosis across the economy, but more expansion of the size and reach of government. Perhaps this would not so much change the country as accelerate some of our most worrisome trends.

Away from the economy we might see a tsunami of political correctness and identity politics, from eradicating gender on birth certificates to shunning the study of Western civilisation at universities. Again, this would be nothing new, just an acceleration of regrettable trends.

Shorten's record and background suggest he should be reliable on the US alliance and strategic and security issues, despite constant pressure from the ALP's socialist left factions.

We can only hope that the retrograde steps in economic management and progressive-minded tendencies in social policy are tempered by Shorten's pragmatic and disciplined instincts for survival and success. Otherwise we will need to wait for a corrective from the Coalition side that it has failed to grasp in government. Eventually the conservative side of politics will coalesce confidently around the values and imperatives that matter. But, just now, that seems too far away.

Chris Kenny