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Is Kevin Rudd Australia’s Tony Blair?

Ideologically, Kevin Rudd and Tony Blair are very similar. They both hail from a moderate right group within their respective labour parties. They both draw on the social concerns of protestant ministers in working class suburbs a hundred years ago. They believe well-funded public education provides both rich and poor individuals with an equal opportunity to discover their own potential. They both want to improve public health and retirement provision. Politically, their views chime well with the religiously flavoured social concerns of established church leaders. The views of John Howard, and Peter Costello, on the other hand fit better with the more pro-capitalist self-help orientation of the new community churches, such as the Hillsong Church. These churches have strong followings in the outer-suburban electorates of Sydney and Melbourne.

In the areas of economic policy and social-welfare policy, a Rudd ALP Government would follow Blair’s “Third Way” between capitalism and welfare-statism, which in turn broadly followed the “Consensus” policies of the Hawke-Keating ALP Governments (1982-1996). Just as Blair continued much of the public bureaucracy cuts of the Thatcher-Major Conservative Governments (1979-1997), a Rudd ALP Government will not rush to abolish private employment services in favour of reinstating the old commonwealth employment services. Nor, it would seem, will Rudd rush to change public subsidies for above-average wage-earners’ private insurance that supplements Medicare. Rudd has already put greater emphasis than the Howard Government upon funding education at all levels, but that too is consistent with mild shifts in education policy by the Blair Government in the UK.

On foreign policy, it was always strange that Blair followed President Bush into Iraq. He did it despite their ideological differences to keep the US engaged in Europe as a counterweight to France and the newly reunited Germany. Whatever the ideological colour of the next US President and whatever happens in the Middle East, Rudd will face similar pressures to keep the US engaged in our region. Tensions between China and Taiwan, India and Pakistan, and the instability of North Korea, Indonesia, and Pacific states pose significant problems in an era of greater international terrorism.

The most important difference between Rudd and Blair lies in who they oppose. Like footballers, politicians look great against weak opponents but not nearly so good when they meet their match. Blair won an overwhelming landslide in 1997 because the Major Conservative Government was weak and beset by scandals. The Howard Government is not beset by scandals and it retains a strong reputation for economic management. Just as Thatcher went too far with her unpopular proposal for a local government flat tax, Howard has gone too far with his unpopular Work Choices legislation to allow dismissals more easily and promote individual Australian Workplace Awards. After the invention of non-core promises in 1997, the Waterfront dispute of 1998, the children overboard controversy during the 2000 elections, the controversy over refugee detention centres, and the David Hicks case, it may be that the Howard Government has simply been in office for too long and people have stopped listening to it, but Rudd won’t win a huge landslide the way Blair did in 1997.

On matters of ideology, economic policy, social policy and foreign policy, Rudd is something like Australia’s Tony Blair. On matters of politics in general and industrial
relations, Rudd faces a more worthy opponent in a different time and place and that will make him quite different to Blair.

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