Winners and losers: the ALP leadership spill and the triumph of the insiders

Gillard leaves the ballot with allies Wayne Swan and Craig Emerson.

Julia Gillard won an impressive victory today, one that Kevin Rudd will find it very difficult to come back from. The scale of her victory contrasted with support for Rudd among the broader public or even among Labor voters.

Opposition to Rudd among Labor MPs was reflected in the broader milieu of Labor-friendly academics and journalists. The closer a Labor sympathiser was to the centres of power, the more likely they were to support Gillard. Her appeal is to those comfortable with the idea of exercising power and secure in their knowledge of how it works.

Gillard supporters on social media, for example, constantly explained, with a tone of exasperation, that voters do not elect the Prime Minister. In this they are technically correct, but for decades parties have told voters that elections are about choosing a prime minister.

Who supports Gillard?

For many of Gillard’s supporters there is little consideration of why an incumbent Labor PM might leave Labor voters so unenthused. The major excuse that her supporters propose is
misogyny. The populist right provides much evidence of this, but educated professional women have been a key component of Labor’s support base since the 1980s. Gillard’s poor appeal to Labor voters is evidence that many of these voters have been alienated from her as individual, not as a woman.

Rudd’s public campaign for the leadership centered on his electoral appeal but there is little evidence that Labor MPs from more marginal electorates were more willing to support him. One significant factor was that MPs from the left were notably more likely to vote for Rudd.

But senior left figures such as Kim Carr and Anthony Albanese were unable even to rally all of their faction to support Rudd. Lindsay Tanner noted years ago that factional allegiance in the ALP is often based on what or whom someone opposes rather than what they stand for.

Rudd presented himself as the victim of the ascendant Right (wing) within the party, in particular MPs such as Bill Shorten, Mark Arbib, David Feeney and Don Farrell. These men may be a political liability to Gillard, but she easily won the ballot despite them.

Statements by Left MPs supporting Rudd were almost devoid of any reference to policy and instead cited Rudd’s electoral popularity. Rudd’s own appeal to caucus members was almost empty of policy content: vague references to the importance of manufacturing and a gimmicky scheme of HECS remission were all that he offered. Marriage equality, an issue on which there are costless votes to be won from the Greens, rated not a mention.

Who has she left behind?

In part at least, Gillard disappoints many Labor voters for her ostentatious social conservatism. Rather like Bob Carr or Tony Blair, she comes across as someone to whom appeasing popular conservatism is not a necessity but a joyous task.

For political insiders this demonstrates her acuity but it alienates a broad group of voters. We could characterise this group as disproportionately female, not particularly interested in politics, but generally Labor-voting. They would have voted for Keating in 1996 and for the republic (if they could), but they are not rusted-on members of the left milieu that agonises between Labor and the Greens.

Their vision of what they like about Labor is an image, sometimes vague, of a progressive nation, the Redfern Park speech jumbled with the Apology with Kevin Rudd triumphing over the Global Financial Crisis.

They are the sort of voters who might, if enthusiastic, argue the case for Labor in workforce chat or on social media. The mood of these voters influences more Labor MPs from the left than the right, hence the relatively greater disaffection with Gillard among the left.

The ALP is not dead yet

Is Labor finished? It’s hard to tell. Voters have a low opinion of politicians. They expect them to fight among themselves and as long as their lives are unaffected by government they are surprisingly forgiving of party disunity.
Paul Keating triumphed after a bruising and desperate battle. John Curtin came to power after the 1940 election due to Labor’s strong performance in NSW despite there being three competing parties in that state.

Tony Abbott does not excite voters. The economic fundamentals favour Labor as they did Howard before his victories in 2001 and 2004. Labor has proven itself skilled in the state level at grinding out victories against the odds.

Whether Labor wins or loses the political dynamic on the left on the left will continue to be set by the Greens. It is not surprising that Green voters and MPs were supportive of Gillard. This means a left that cedes economic policy, protectionist noises notwithstanding, to the technocratic centre.

With that said, this leadership tussle was not largely based on policy. The battle between Rudd and Gillard could have been more than froth and bubble, but sadly it was not. Whether Gillard can rise above it will remain to be seen.