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Will history remember Gillard’s three years favourably?

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Julia Gillard has been a reasonably effective politician, but the political paradigm within which she has worked is approaching the end of its life. She has been aware of this but has struggled to develop an effective response.

Since the 1990s, Australian politics has functioned within the parameters of a political order established by the successive Hawke-Keating governments. This order combined a globalised economy with a well-developed structure of social protection.

John Howard’s administration added to this new Australian settlement with a layer of rhetorical social conservatism, but he fell when WorkChoices challenged the residual framework of worker
protections.

The complacency of the Howard years obscured fundamental problems within the Australian political order. It failed to address Australia’s role in climate change, it upheld a model of immigration no longer sustainable in the age of “people smuggling”, the position of many indigenous communities remained massively disadvantaged, public education became increasingly residual, and successive rounds of tax cuts weakened the revenue base.

Gillard has effectively governed within the parameters of the Hawke-Keating settlement, but has been reluctant to challenge it. Her political skills have been overstated by her admirers. She has faced a very different parliament than her predecessor Kevin Rudd.

Fear of opposition leader Tony Abbott has bonded the Greens and the “small l” liberal independents to the government. The Coalition has provided bipartisan support on issues such as the Northern Territory intervention where the government has been faithful to the Howard government’s conservative legacy.

Yet Gillard’s success in parliamentary management has not been matched by an ability to appeal to voters. Economic uncertainty means that a Labor defeat in 2013 would not be a surprise, but the magnitude of the party’s defeat may be exceptionally severe. Labor has demonstrated a unique ability to lose votes on both sides of an issue: immigration policy and indigenous affairs are examples.

As prime minister, Gillard has presided over a dramatic decline in support for Labor among non-Anglo communities. This has been most apparent in NSW, and encouraged by the clumsy rhetoric around 457 visas. Valid concerns about the exploitation of foreign workers have been entangled in a muddled attempt to find a rhetorical rival to the appeal of anti-asylum seeker rhetoric.

The government’s approach to the new social movements, such as those of sexuality, indigenous nationalism, environmentalism and gender - whose support the Hawke and Keating governments cultivated - has been inconsistent at best and has smacked of opportunism at the worst. Gillard’s grace under vicious misogynist pressure has been commendable but the government’s specifically feminist record has been mixed and largely limited by its labourist framework.

This has been most apparent in its unsupportive attitude towards the largely female population of single parents on welfare payments. The continuation of the Northern Territory intervention demonstrates that Labor has largely accepted the terms of the right’s critique of indigenous self-determination.

No action has been taken to reverse the onus of proof in native title claims, as proposed by Paul Keating. Keating argued that the current legislation placed an unjust burden on those claimants who had “suffered the most severe dispossession and social disruption” after colonisation.

The government has tied its political fortunes to the carbon price. There is little doubt that had Labor been able to form a government in its own right, it would not have legislated for a price on carbon.
There is a reasonable prospect that an Abbott government will repeal the carbon price. This would be a devastating defeat for the Australian environmental movement.

The Gillard government has felt on secure ground in industrial relations. In large part it has rested on the achievement of having ended the Howard government’s WorkChoices. And yet, the Gillard government has failed to develop an effective regulatory response to the decline in the relative pay of award dependent workers, a disproportionately female constituency. Support by the government for higher pay for community sector workers will go some way to addressing this problem.

The government mishandled the rhetoric of fiscal policy and chained itself to the unrealistic target of a return to budget surplus in 2013. Labor’s budgetary woes have revealed a structural gap between expenditure and revenue that is a result of the tax cuts of the Howard years. Kevin Rudd committed Labor to their continuation. Gillard has, in the same vein as Hawke and Keating, sought to target public expenditure towards low-income earners with some success.

The scope for further targeting is limited. The “low tax, social democracy” model of Hawke-Keating Labor is almost exhausted. The mining tax was an attempt to address the revenue deficiency: its failure has been partially compensated by the increase in the Medicare levy to partially fund the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This is a significant achievement. That the Coalition agreed to this increase in taxation was also a major victory for Australian social democracy.

History will largely judge Julia Gillard as an archetypal modern Labor leader as I suggested at the time of her ascension to the leadership three years ago. She is a competent politician, less prone to wishful thinking about public opinion than her left-wing critics, but her response to the crisis of modern labourism has often been backward looking.

Her critics within Labor have offered in response little more than their own nostalgia: a return to the myth of Kevin ‘07.