

Gillard's morality of convenience

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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: The Australian

JULIA Gillard is a woman of principle: the survival principle. And if the backflip on asylum-seekers is about saving lives, the life it is intended to save is her own.

Little wonder she dressed soberly for the occasion. English judges donned the black cap when passing a sentence of death; this was conservative Julia, in twinset and pearls, dispatching another promise to the high jump.

Was this the woman who said "no rational person" could believe Australia would be processing asylum claims on Nauru in 2013? No, that never happened. And if it did happen, it was mere "history" and she was "over it". No point in dwelling on the past; the time had come to "end the politics" and "solve the problem".

As for how to do so, it was not as if solving problems was what parliament, much less Gillard herself, had been elected to do. Nor was making basic choices of values, such as those involved in asylum policy, the very heart of politics, whatever that confused Greek, Aristotle, may have thought.

Good thing, then, that she had found three men (not in a boat) to crack in six weeks the mysteries that had eluded her for five years. And staring over the precipice of nothingness, she was about as likely to query her expert panel's proposals as Lady Macbeth was to knock back a good night's sleep. Especially as those proposals would finally excise the damned spot.

But will they? Yes, restoring aspects of the Pacific Solution could discourage potential arrivals, as the expert panel argues. But the panel's analysis is incomplete in important respects. In particular, perhaps because of its tight time constraints, the panel ignored the empirical analyses that have been undertaken of asylum policy (details are on my blog).

Those analyses, which examine the impact of changes in asylum policy on refugee inflows, show the Pacific Solution had a far greater effect on arrivals than experience elsewhere would have led one to expect. Statistically, the measures Howard adopted should have reduced arrivals by about one-third; their actual impact was probably twice that.

Why were the effects so large? Because there was no doubting Howard's commitment to the policy of deterrence. From the Tampa incident on, it was plain he would do whatever it takes to stop boat arrivals.

Although some softening of the policy occurred in its later years, the signal Howard sent was unquestionably credible. And the evidence suggests it was that credibility, and the strong convictions on which it was based, that accounted for much of the policy's effectiveness, rather than the specific measures themselves.

But how credible can Gillard's commitment be? True, at the moment, her future depends on it; but what would happen should it become expedient to yet again change course? Having outsourced policy once, wouldn't she repeat the trick? Of course she would. And the people smugglers know it.

One reason they know it is that her silence speaks louder than words. There is nothing wrong with changing one's views; but there is something wrong with being unwilling to say one has. For that smacks of insincerity, inviting the inference that another volte-face is simply a matter of time.

The nature of the views she expressed makes that inference all the stronger. Her fundamental criticisms of Howard's Pacific Solution did not go to its efficacy, though she also disputed that; they went to the policy's moral acceptability. An expert report can change one's views on efficacy; but how can it change one's views on morality? Perhaps she had not really held those views at all: perhaps they were merely convenient then, just as their opposite is convenient now. And as convenience moves, her beliefs will move with it.

That cannot but undermine the credibility of the new approach and hence its outcomes. But the episode also casts the Prime Minister's character in a clearer light.

From when she was elected to parliament, the girl from Glamorgan has claimed to be inspired by her Welsh forebear, Nye Bevan, founder of Britain's National Health Service and leader in the 1950s of the Labour Left.

Yet Bevan was hardly one for the casual backflip. Not that he made a virtue out of obstinacy: the politician, he wrote, "must guard against old words, for words persist when the reality behind them has changed, and from that point on, ideas degenerate into folklore". Moreover, compromise was inevitable, for democratic politics is "a fretwork, not a passion play".

But there was a thin line between pragmatism and opportunism. And what defined that line was the courage to accept responsibility for yesterday's words as much as today's.

Otherwise how could one say, as Bevan famously said, "This is my truth; now tell me yours"? Yes, reversals would happen, but they had to be explained: why what had been done in the past had been done; why that could no longer be done in future.

And when one could not truthfully do that, the only option, rather than "reverse a policy he had himself proclaimed on many public platforms", was to resign, as Bevan did in 1951.

But that is not the Bevan that Gillard seems to have absorbed. Rather, it is the man whose view of the world never rose above the misery of the mining valleys of his youth. And when that world disappeared, he found himself out of sympathy with an age in which, in the coalfield from which he came, "Marx and Engels have been supplanted by Marks and Spencer, and the sound of the class war drowned by the hum of the spin dryer". Overtaken by forces he could not understand, but still burning with rage, all he could do was rail against his political opponents as "organised spiverry" at best, "vermin" at worst, whose victory would be "intolerable".

It is that visceral outrage over long gone grievances that makes Gillard a Bevanite. But she has abandoned the Welsh chapel moralism that was integral to Bevan's socialism. A doctrinaire without doctrine, she would rather shred her convictions than shed her power. And executed with steely ease, her changes of course may even work, at least some of the time.

But not with the people smugglers. For they are made of sterner stuff. Dealing with them takes more than a politics of convenience. It takes a politics of conviction, of the kind Howard brought, and the credibility that comes with it. That is what Gillard lacks. Unless she can establish it, the people smugglers will continue to win every round.