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Light on the hill flames out

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 18, 2013 12:00AM



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: TheAustralian

IT would be possible to tell the tale of Jules and Kev comically, pathetically, even savagely.

A melange of error and inevitability, the story of their marriage of convenience has a compelling Wagnerian symmetry: he the false prophet who, once unmasked, turned mutual deception into mutual assured destruction; she the author of the most monstrous display of ingratitude since Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan turned on their father. The character flaws alone would justify the Australia Council commissioning one of those impenetrable modern operas.

Nor would there be any shortage of dramatic moments. The meeting between Rudd and Gillard, on the fateful night of his first death (after which there was meant to be no other), has an almost allegorical quality that merits being enshrined on a mural in the room in which it took place. Join to it the scenes leading from initial triumphs to final farewells and there would not be a dry eye in the house.

Yet the mystery remains. Seeing Rudd, it was difficult not to be reminded of Alfred Deakin's comment about Henry Parkes: that "it was always a problem where the actor-posturemaker ended or the actual man underneath began". As for Gillard, her retorts had the flash of light along a blade; but cleverness did not prevent her combining tactical misjudgment with strategic folly.

There were nonetheless crucial differences between them. Rudd was a loner, with a will for power almost as overwhelming as his fear of rejection. If he had a coherent view of the world, it too often got lost in the verbiage he mistook for clear thought. Lacking a firm analytical compass, his policy initiatives

proved exercises in futility that gave birth to a swarm of failures.

Gillard, on the other hand, was the ultimate loyalist. Not to people, but to her party and even more so, to that great Welsh tradition, the class struggle. However unhesitating she may have been in her willingness to abandon principles, she was unswerving in her attachment to the one true cause: entrenching the unions.

It was for their sake that when the country turned Right in 2010, she took her government sharply to the Left, doing whatever she could to lock in the great leap backwards Labor's industrial relations laws had inaugurated. It was soon clear her Left turn would inflict a massive electoral cost; but like the "frontiski" of the Red Army, sacrificing themselves to break the class-enemy's front, she never turned back.

Compounding the resulting disaster were the weaknesses of her colleagues. Wayne Swan downsized the intellectual standing of his office almost as rapidly as he supersized public spending. Stephen Conroy, with his extraordinary mixture of menace, vulgarity and naivete, showed time and again that where there was no low road, he could be counted on to blaze one. And even those with real quality lacked the clout, courage or conviction to make any real difference.

Nor could they have. For the ALP is an anachronism. In an age when political parties are "catch-all" movements competing for electorates to whom the 19th century's social cleavages mean nothing, Labor remains, as Gillard defiantly proclaimed, the party of labour. Trapped in its myths, it invests itself with a historic mission of leading "working people" to the "light on the hill": a light whose glare now serves mainly to hide corrupt deals and tarnished ideals.

The result is that the parliamentary party has become a parking lot for union bureaucrats, whose dominance has increased just as they have become less representative. In 1971, when more than half the workforce were in unions, 24 per cent of Labor federal MPs were former officials or staffers; now that barely 15 per cent of the workforce are in unions, the proportion is more than 70 per cent. That proportion is unparalleled internationally. In British Labour, unions account for just 18 per cent of MPs; and even in the Norwegian Labour Party, tied to one of the world's most powerful union movements, officials or staffers account for 35 per cent of elected representatives. It is therefore unsurprising that the ALP's parliamentary wing reflects the characteristics needed to climb the unions' greasy pole: characteristics that have far less to do with grand goals than with unbridled ambition.

To aggravate matters, the last six years will only strengthen that bias. After all, Rudd was not one of theirs; the mistake of marrying outside the tribe will not be repeated again.

Little wonder then that the leadership contest was between Anthony Albanese and Bill Shorten, who both served the unions faithfully while Labor was in power; and with Shorten winning thanks to factional votes in caucus, Labor's direction is being set by a man who was not only entangled in protecting Craig Thomson but wanted Australia to adopt a swathe of international labour conventions that the Whitlam, Hawke and Keating governments had rejected.

All that is light years away from the reinvention Labor requires to have a credible claim to govern. Perpetual opposition is not a good life; instead of stimulating reform, it brings out a party's worst tendencies. And however bad that may be for Labor, it is even worse for the country, which needs an opposition that is creative and effective.

Unfortunately, that may be a long time coming. Great parties do not die; they merely shrivel into irrelevance. That is the risk with which Rudd and Gillard leave the party they once led. For them,

however, the experience was a personal tragedy. Yes, they were the authors of their own fate; but as they leave the scene, Robert Frost's words should echo through the hall:

"A voice said, Look me in the stars

And tell me truly, men of earth,

If all the soul and body scars,

Were not too much to pay for birth."