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The prime of Ms Julia Gillard

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 06, 2014 12:00AM



Illustration: Tom Jellet Source: Supplied

HAD Julia Gillard been the heroine of a Gothic romance, she would have put a stiletto through Kevin Rudd’s heart and gone mad. Instead, she worked the numbers, became prime minister and has now written a book.

Its 460 pages battle a paradox. In politics, there are loyalists and loners. Few politicians could claim to be a stauncher loyalist than Gillard; yet she will be remembered for the greatest act of disloyalty since Goneril and Regan turned on their father.

But as Muriel Spark tells us in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, “it is only possible to betray where loyalty is due”. And Gillard too believes in being faithful only to those to whom she thinks faithfulness is owed. Rather than Rudd, however, Gillard’s loyalty goes first and foremost to her party.

Invoked time and again, that higher obligation serves both to exonerate her and to excoriate her predecessor. To have allowed Rudd to stay would be “unfair to the Labor Party”; and while she was “hesitant” to do the deed, Rudd, “like a patient with terminal cancer”, was doomed. Moreover, having lost office, his duty to the party was clear: he should have “stayed quiet” and “immediately left the political scene”.

Unfortunately, democratic centralism (as Leninists called the individual’s subordination to the party’s will) was never Rudd’s style. Instead, fuelled by “malice which knows no bounds”, his supporters were “prepared to do anything, including trashing a Labor government, to achieve their aims”. And as if that

was not bad enough, Labor, by returning Rudd to the leadership, “grandly rewarded the very worst of conduct”, ensuring “there will be more of it”.

The legacy is a party which must “now confront the hard task of re-engineering its internal culture”, lumbered by rules that protect even a leader who “overwhelmingly loses the confidence of his or her colleagues” behind “artificially high majorities for change”.

That Gillard finds this troubling is scarcely surprising. On June 23, 2010, she and her co-conspirators attacked Rudd’s leadership as if it was the Bridge on the River Kwai; now, like Alec Guinness, they stare at the wreckage, scratching their heads and asking “What have I done?”.

More telling is the fact that she finds Rudd’s conduct so difficult to understand. After all, it hardly takes much imagination to realise Rudd would perceive himself as the victim of a monstrous injustice; and Bacon knew what he was talking about when he said that only the “wild justice” of revenge truly equalises great wrongs, indifferent to every concern except the need to right injury.

Gillard, however, is an apparatchik. “Not haunted by regrets” nor “much given to agonising personal journeys”, she is always ready to “put the party first”, even when its decisions are unjust. In her Manichean world, there are children of darkness and children of light: a party of good people and one of bad.

No wonder her writing recalls Christopher Hitchens’ observation that “there’s no real trick to thinking like an apparatchik: you just keep two sets of ethical books.” True, at times, “the good people’s party may be caught doing something shady or vile”. But at once, “you will be told it’s no worse than what the bad people’s party would do or has done.”

Splashed on page after self-serving page, the results flirt with parody. Craig Thomson and Peter Slipper? Yes, under other circumstances she “could have acted differently”; but she needed their vote to retain power. The “unprincipled” Tony Abbott, on the other hand, would do “whatever it takes” to gain office.

Industrial relations? Yes, militants “occasionally” cause trouble; but it is thanks to the unions, which are “home to selfless decent Australians who uphold the values that have made us the nation we are today”, that her government was able to prevent “rorts (by) unscrupulous employers”.

And the budget? Yes, the promised return to surplus was a mistake; but her government had it tough. Peter Costello didn’t: his surpluses were delivered when “it was easy to be Treasurer”, Gillard tells us, ignoring the debt he inherited, the Asian Financial Crisis and the “tech wreck”.

But if the Coalition was the adversary, Rudd was the enemy. And it is with the Rudd camp that the two sets of ethical books come fully into play. Her coup against Rudd, for example, was entirely justified, not least by the likelihood of electoral disaster; but calling a spill when she was leading Labor off a cliff was “an act of treachery”. And it was only Rudd’s betrayal that brought her prime ministership down.

It could all have been so different, she suggests. And there is a constituency for whom Gillard embodies lost hopes and lost opportunities, a symbol of what could have been if. If what? If Rudd had given up, if her opponents had been a bit less bloody minded, if she had had more time?

Perhaps misogyny would have been eradicated, the boats stopped and the Asian Century’s five-year plan fulfilled, to thunderous acclamation, in just four. But more likely not.

For while Rudd’s scheming contributed to Gillard’s demise, it was the foolish errors she made that undid

her. Trapped in the web she and Rudd had spun for themselves, Gillard, invariably more able than wise, discovered that those who live by political calculation must expect to die by political miscalculation.

“One’s prime is elusive,” Miss Brodie warns her girls. “You must be on the alert to recognise your prime at whatever time of your life it may occur. You must live it to the full.” The prime (ministership) of Ms Julia Gillard was that moment; in the end, the steely will, the quick wit and the easy smile proved not enough.

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