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# Nation still reels from toppling of Kevin Rudd by his own party in 2010

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM November 24, 2017

When the voters of Bennelong turfed John Howard out exactly 10 years ago, “Kevin 07” seemed to offer a fresh alternative to a government that was scarred and wearied after four terms in office.

Now the Turnbull government may well lose the seat to an Opposition Leader who is even more unpopular than the Prime Minister and whose candidate, though denying all wrongdoing, comes to the contest badly tarnished.

Already reeling from five changes of prime minister in a decade, the country could then face an early election that adds a sixth name to the prime ministerial list, making the period that opened with the fall of the Howard government the most unstable since the early days of Federation.

And with Bill Shorten arousing little public enthusiasm, and having plenty of rivals in his own ranks, he too may soon exit the revolving door, confirming that Australia, which once had relatively enduring governments, is trapped in a cycle of turmoil.

At one level the instability is due to the long shadow cast by the events that kicked that cycle off.

Memories have been blunted by the whirl of comings and goings; nonetheless, the fact remains that virtually up to the fateful evening of June 24, 2010, Kevin Rudd was extraordinarily popular, with net satisfaction ratings that trounced those of his predecessors.

That the palace coup that displaced him would have damaged voters’ trust in our system of government is therefore unsurprising. And the way his former colleagues, smouldering with rage and hate, then turned on Rudd, only to soon turn on each other, must have deepened that angry “indifference which is not apathy” DH Lawrence thought lurked in the Australian soul.

At the same time, Rudd’s ousting triggered a dynamic that is eerily familiar to historians from the study of regicides. As Cambridge’s Manuel Eisner showed in an analysis of 10 centuries of regal murders, regicides rarely come alone. Rather, once the initial deed is done, those who commit it are three times more likely to themselves end up as victims of a coup than otherwise comparable rulers, with that elevated probability also afflicting several generations of their successors.

That pattern, in which regicide begets regicide, is not difficult to explain. Those who seize the throne lack legitimacy; their tenure is tainted from the outset. Having demonstrated that power can be seized, they invite imitators. And because they live in fear of their colleagues, their style of government tends to be divisive and ineffective, fuelling discontent.

Together those two forces — a sullen electorate and a political system gripped by regicide’s momentum — have fed our vicious cycle: with disillusioned voters refusing to give new prime ministers the benefit of the doubt, their public support proves fleeting; and when the loss of support plunges the polls into negative territory, prime ministers find themselves under threat, undermining their capacity to govern and transforming leadership speculation into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Moreover, once that prophecy plays itself out, their successor quickly discovers that navigating the ground they have conquered is as safe as a round of golf in a minefield, starting the cycle all over again.

Little wonder then that since Julia Gillard took office, no prime minister has consistently had positive net satisfaction ratings. Only 30 per cent of Howard’s four terms, and just 7 per cent of Rudd’s first term, were spent with net negative ratings; since the 2010 coup, prime ministers have, on average, spent more than 70 per cent of their time in negative territory.

Seen in that perspective, the source of our troubles would be a contingent event: the premature ending of the first Rudd government. But that event itself needs to be explained: after all, Paul Keating, perhaps the most persistently unpopular prime minister in Australian history, did not face a serious threat of displacement. And the sheer scale of the instability Rudd’s removal unleashed also demands explanation.

There is little doubt broader social forces are at work. The electorate has fragmented in ways that have shattered the social and economic coalitions on which our major parties were based, making it difficult for them to assemble mass constituencies. In turn, that fragmentation has been mirrored within the parties, weakening internal alliances while intensifying the jockeying for position. As the major parties seem ever more caught up in their internal dramas, the political fringe has expanded but, excepting the

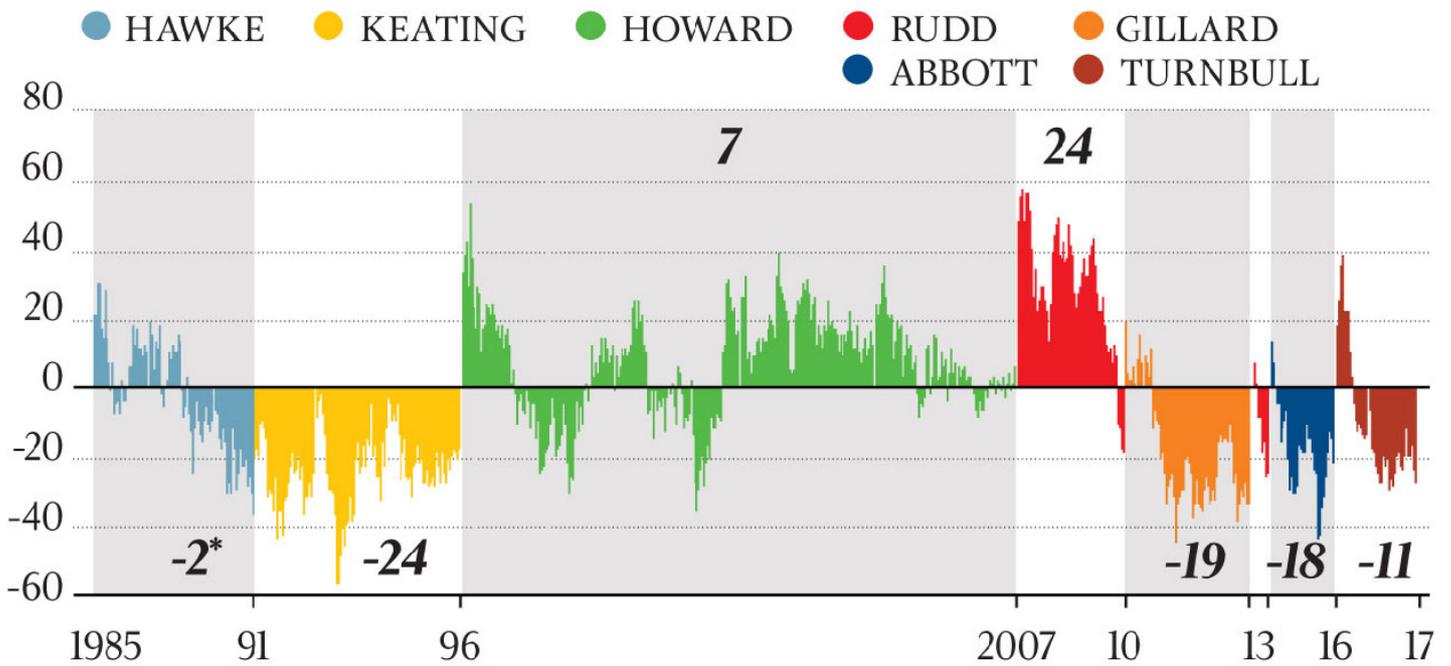
Greens, has not found a stable base.

Rudd’s ascendancy, which lifted a rank outsider into the Lodge on a surge of popular support that verged on hysteria, was itself symptomatic of those changes. His sacking therefore hit a political system that was already teetering, magnifying the shock. And with the aftershocks continuing to echo, stability may well remain elusive, all the more so as ongoing chaos further dints public confidence.

That doesn’t mean we are doomed to repeat the recent past. Historically, periods such as these have ended when a new style of politics emerges that captures the spirit of the age, as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan did in bringing the political crisis of the 1970s to a close. But that requires a quality of leadership, and a capacity to understand the tiger one is trying to ride, that we have not seen since 2007.

Whether we will see it in the years ahead is impossible to say. In the meantime, we are left with the foreboding the Alexandrian Greek poet Constantine Cavafy so magnificently evoked over a century ago in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: “Why is there such great idleness inside Senate house? / Because the barbarians will arrive today. / Why should the Senators still make laws? / The barbarians, when they come, will legislate.”

## PMs and their Newspoll ratings



\*Average net satisfaction

Source: Net satisfaction ratings on Newspoll