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Battles and Causes: The Ongoing Failure of the ALP

The Immediate:

I'm not suggesting that Bill Shorten lost the election on the back of his performance on 7.30 two weeks prior to the 2019 election. It turns out that he had perhaps already lost. I acknowledge the many causes and moving parts to victory and defeat. I am suggesting, however, that his performance was fundamentally weak and summed up an unchecked approach to media work that, since his inception as opposition leader, was never going to bring the ultimate success of an election victory.

I am also suggesting that, to the question on costings for the ALP's climate policy, the line:

'It will cost a lot less than the cost of inaction' can only be trotted out once (perhaps twice) during an election campaign. It's not a bad line. You can use it doorways as you depart a press conference. It's a sharp departing rebuke.

But when you're in the studio sitting opposite Leigh Sales, the exit is a long way off. And when you're asked the inevitable question on climate policy costings on prime-time television, you need to have an answer that either deals with the question or turns the situation in your favour. If you are responding with:

'It will cost a lot less than the cost of inaction', you are failing to understand the room you're in because you are present on prime-time television to engage. This line was deliberately penned to avoid engagement, as I said: in doorways or closing stages of press conferences.

When you're sitting opposite Leigh Sales in an ABC studio and you're an aspiring prime minister, you need to understand why you're there. You are there to engage, and if you don't engage with Australia's premier current affairs host and journalist two weeks out from an election, you insult her and the Australian people.

And then you get defensive. And then the interview turns to pot. And when a person gets defensive, they show (for better or worse) their true selves.

So, when Mr Shorten showed his true self in this interview and started using words like 'bugger-all' live on prime-time television, many people were moved to ask: 'Why weren't you real at the start of the interview; it might have gone a lot better?'

Less forgiving people might have assumed that Mr Shorten was rattled.

The Problem:

Mr Shorten's problem in failing to quantify his climate policy, or turn this 'how long is a piece of string' inquiry to his favour, derived from poor advice. The eternal problem of the ALP, indeed the eternal problem for the Left or Centre Left globally, is its proclivity to assume that a diverse range of people are aligned with its causes.

The art of persuasion is to bring the neutrals and moderate hostiles to the table. They simply won't accept a moral or ethical crusade as a justifiable reason for doing X or a plausible reason for doing Y.

By failing to connect in a meaningful way, the neutrals and particularly the moderate hostiles can only see how such a policy hurts them financially.

To criticise self-centredness, as many are, is unhelpful because self-interest is nothing new.

The failure of the political left is a failure of psychology.

To not attempt a valid answer to the unerring question on climate policy costing is, if nothing else, sadly naïve because the respondent is essentially saying: 'The cause is enough.'

But the *cause* is never enough to people who are not already with you. They need you to address the *battle* because the battle is for the mind.

Never assume you have their hearts.

The Solution: If you Want to Sell Nuclear Power, talk about the Golden Gate Bridge

When primitive humans discovered fire, they didn't say: "Ouch! Gee, that's hot. Put that stuff away! It's dangerous." In a similar vein, the thousands who travel across the Golden Gate Bridge each day are neither holding their breath nor muttering prayers. The Golden Gate Bridge represents an enormous architectural nose thumbing to earth-quake fault lines and danger. It is a celebration of humankind's triumph over the natural world. If humankind was not overtly adventurous in this way we'd have never stood upright, we'd have never eaten meat and our brains would not have put on the growth spurt that they did...

In other words: the pursuit of nuclear power, like the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, is an extension of the human spirit.

This diversionary tactic is designed to move the conversation towards positive imagery and human inspiration. Consider it a metaphor for shifting the discussion away from the negative logos of measurement, such as the number of deaths at Fukushima (or the cost of a climate policy in the debate at hand), towards a positive ethos, hope, possibility and future orientation.

To continue the metaphor: to dwell solely in a head-to-head discussion on nuclear power without the positive imagery is a road to oblivion.

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Bear with me.

The word 'reform' has a negative connotation; yet the word 'superannuation' has a positive association.

They are one and the same thing.

Yet, the workers of QLD didn't vote Labor.

The workers of QLD didn't vote for the party that made superannuation compulsory.

The workers of QLD didn't vote for the party that made superannuation compulsory – for all workers.

I'm spelling it out in this fashion because the party that devised this reform assumes that we all know this.

The party that implemented this reform doesn't mention it anymore because they do not have a sense of the psychological battle they're in. They won the cause on superannuation but fail to realise that this universally popular cause can become the centre-piece of future battles.

If people don't know their history then it is up to the ALP to remind them that compulsory superannuation for all employees was an *immensely* challenging nation-building exercise.

It didn't just happen.

There was a battle to make it happen. There was a battle to ensure that it extended to all Australians.

There was a battle to communicate the ideology of *investment* and to expel the primitive associations of *cost*.

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Returning to the question:

'So, what will your climate change policy cost the Australian tax-payer, Mr Shorten?'

Avoidance is disastrous for many obvious reasons and one reason that is less apparent.

A politician should always see hostile situations as opportunities. If they can only see threats, they are not very effective politicians.

The tactical failure of the ALP for decades is its inability to communicate (indeed eradicate) the word 'expenditure' from the lexicon.

If you look up a competent undergraduate text book on economics, you'll see a definition that fits the ALP: *expansionist*. It has an expansionist fiscal policy that is aligned with generating greater equality in society.

Says nothing about costs.

To answer a question such as this head-on is problematic but avoidance is worse because it communicates that 'cost' is a dirty word.

Is your super fund that has perhaps trebled over a period of six to ten years also a dirty word?

No. It is an investment in your future.

And all of society appreciates the ALP's investments over time. In thirty years, a statue will be erected of Mr Daniel Andrews: 'The Infrastructure Premier' will be the inscription.

It won't be erected today, because today you and many other people are sitting in a traffic jam on account of road infrastructure works across Melbourne.

Returning to the response that Mr Shorten might have made to the above question:

'Leigh: *you* know, and the Australian people know and many of the children of Australian miners (appeal to moderate hostiles) know, based on anecdotal evidence of student climate action protests across the country, that this is a massive investment in the future of all Australians. Like superannuation and universal healthcare before it (humanising appeal to all parties), nation-building policies of investment infrastructure that were challenging at their inception stage, we simply don't accept the simplistic labelling of 'cost' because ultimately it's about improving productivity, future-proofing the nation and confronting the fact that there is a global de-investment in fossil fuels. The world is transitioning. Pension funds are transitioning. All we're really doing is keeping up with the world (normalise and globalise the decision-making) and many of our business partners who have already transitioned to cleaner energy sources. It's like when your computer can no longer upgrade to the latest version of Google Chrome: it's time for a new model (light-hearted appeal to youth and political allies).'

Deal with the issue of quantification head-on by admitting that it will be an investment of billions over time:

Ask me a nebulous question about the length of a certain piece of string. I answer it in a nebulous but broadly quantified way. You can't accuse me of not answering the question and you cannot accuse me of not dealing with the brutal matter of measurement.

Put the issue to bed as soon as possible in the election campaign, spin cost into investment and return fire with this question to the Conservatives:

'I say this to the Coalition: stop deceiving the Australian people! Explain to them what the cost of inaction will be? (now you can use the word 'cost' in its rightful place). You run with the mantra of sound economic management – yet you cannot explain to the Australian people how your failure to future-proof this nation will sacrifice the very wealth that you claim to be building. Your failure to explain to the Australian people, and particularly its

youth, the cost of your unwillingness to cooperate with the clever countries of the world on climate policy is a swindle and you know it!

By vocally playing the same rhetorical game as the Conservatives, you remain engaged and on the offensive in the *battle*; by avoiding the question, you are assuming that *cause* is enough.

Why didn't we hear this?

This is a lot better than what Mr Shorten came up with that night on 7.30 – and he has political advisors.

As an extension, raise the subject of the NBN in relation to infrastructure projects and the fallacy of financial prudence – an inherent feature of visionless contractionist fiscal policy (yes, that's a technical term that defines how the Coalition does business) – that will see the network patched and amended over decades at a cost far greater than the ALP's initial outlay. Who could possibly put their hand up and claim that Australia has world-class broadband?

By linking the discussion of investment on climate action to such populist themes characterises the political opponent negatively and demythologises the idea that the Conservatives manage money effectively. Furthermore, it reinforces the perception that the Conservatives are bereft of vision by linking the debate to visible and identifiable self-interest. Remember: the speed of one's broadband is a tangible idea; whereas, for many people, climate change remains an abstract notion. The logical appeal is that if you want a policy to work, you must invest now.

Finally, at the 101 level, the long answer eats up precious and finite interview time, while the short answer: 'It will cost a lot less than the cost of inaction' invites further scrutiny and frustration from the interviewee and the Australian public.

A Side Note on Measurement:

Always use the language of quantification to your advantage. Equivocation is effectively death. The Labour party in the UK makes the same mistake. It imagines that avoidance wins. The ALP lost on a policy of equivocation in relation to Adani. In other words, its equivocation was seen as a decisive negative in the relevant QLD seats. Imagine if the ALP had summoned the courage to address the issue head on, as in: 'The Adani mine, due to its mechanisation, is unlikely to be a sustainable source of employment in the short to medium term.' It's true, we did hear this voice, but not from the ALP.

Such an unequivocal position may have yielded the same or similar result, but it may have also drawn strength from elsewhere. By addressing the issue of sustainability in terms of the metrics of employment, you can avoid a discussion on the environment altogether, *in this instance*, thereby avoiding an attack on the ethics of the participants and removing the prospect of engendering a sense of guilt among them. The guilty retaliate by rage-voting against you because they seek comfort in the known. They are frightened. By returning the discussion to the language of quantification that deals with basic security needs (i.e. the Adani mine will only provide X jobs and won't provide for you or your family in the medium term and will do little to address the high rate of youth unemployment in QLD) is to understand that such people are desperate and will be prepared to cling to grass while drowning.

What occurred, or rather, what was implied with this aspect of the campaign (and the notional alignment with Bob Brown) is therefore typical of ALP campaigning. In plain terms, the assumption of a morally superior cause was a factor that crushed any hope of victory in battle.

The Conclusion:

The tragedy of Kevin Rudd is now laid bare. Hubris does indeed beget nemesis.

The election result in 2007 was not a landslide. To have claimed eighty-three seats is not an enormous majority; but it was the powerful spirit of change at the time that should have ensured two further majority election victories for the ALP.

Perhaps three when you consider that the ALP would like its chances of holding up to ten or twelve seats in QLD with a QLD PM.

The climate war would have been run and won. It would have been, like superannuation and universal healthcare, *normalised*, in spite of the kicking and the screaming.

Now, of course, this is all a fiction.

Looking at the results of the 2019 election, we can surmise the difficulty that the ALP has in Queensland through a sharper lens. Though favoured to win the 2019 election, their seat count in that state will be close, if not identical, to the number they held there in the landslide defeat of 2004.

This is a debacle.

Given the external circumstances of this election in relation to the support for minor parties – in particular, the behaviour of the UAP that could well become the norm – unless the ALP embarks on a fundamental change in psychology; unless it engages more effectively in the battle over the cause, it is unlikely to ever govern this nation again.

This applies to centre-left parties across the globe. Moving further to the left, while an understandable response, is to entrench the failure.

Mr Albanese – take note: Tories will vote for Starmer; I know them personally.