

# FEDERAL CAUCUS MUST NOT PLAY INTO ABBOTT'S HANDS

*Pulling down the Gillard government is a risk Australians can't afford to take*

STEVE BRACKS

MINORITY government is hard. Relationships and trust matter. But a good leader can make it work. That was certainly my experience of minority government in Victoria between 1999 and 2002, working with the three independents in the Victorian parliament.

And that is my impression of the Gillard government over the past 18 months. She has made minority government work effectively. Just look at the substantive nation-building reforms.

A law to structurally separate Telstra. A law to bring balance in how we pay for health services. A law that spreads the benefits of a

mining boom. And a set of laws that puts a price on carbon.

And these are all reforms that can only be stopped by one thing: the election in the short term of an Abbott government.

These reforms must be protected at all costs. They are core to our nation being a fair, prosperous and sustainable place to live.

And these are reforms that place Julia Gillard as one of Labor's great reformers.

But if the federal caucus doesn't back the Prime Minister to see out her term, it won't just put these reforms at risk, it will hurt a generation of working people and their families.

There seems to be an unknown number of federal caucus members who think it is a choice between Gillard and Kevin Rudd. It is not. It's a choice between a Labor government and an Abbott government.

They would undoubtedly know that the Prime Minister's personal relationships and trust with all but one of the crossbenchers is the bedrock of the government.

But these crossbenchers have all said their arrangement is with Gillard and not the Labor Party.

They have indicated that if there is a leadership change we would go back to the drawing board and effectively all bets would be off.

Who is the big beneficiary of this? Tony Abbott.

That is because the withdrawal of the crossbench support would result in an election being called by the Governor-General, or Abbott being commissioned as

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prime minister. But the first minority Abbott government would be a short-run thing with his electoral support being sky high.

He would capitalise on this lead in the polls with an immediate election, resulting in a massive majority and potentially control of the Senate.

We can't deny that Labor's public support is low. That is clear. But it is also mid-term, following some serious policy reforms where the right thing hasn't been the popular thing. By the middle of the year, millions of households will be benefiting from tax cuts and extra cash from the government, and small businesses will be getting a

tax break. All that would be lost with an early election. And who loses the most? Well, that's a difficult question.

Is it a generation of Australians who deserve the best possible communications system that a completed NBN would deliver?

Is it working people who would be forced to subsidise the health-care of Australia's richest millionaires and billionaires?

Is it the generation of young people who would miss out in the profound investment and reform agenda that will transform our nation's education system?

Is it older Australians who would see the largest ever increase in the aged pension clawed back?

Or working Australians who would see their future living standards drop as the world-class retirement incomes policy funded by the minerals resource rent tax was wound back so that \$4.5 billion could be given back to mining

companies? Is it our environment, as our biggest polluters will pay no penalty for the pollution they put into our atmosphere every day? And let's face it, Australia would never have a carbon price; no politician would introduce one again.

Or is it Australian families who want the chance to lay the foundations for a ground breaking National Disability Insurance scheme?

They are all too great a price to pay. It's not a risk worth taking.

I know Gillard and Rudd well. They have their respective strengths.

Isn't it best to use those strengths to see federal Labor under Prime Minister Gillard serve its full term, thereby implementing key nation-building reforms?

The Australian people deserve no less a commitment.

*Steve Bracks was Victorian premier from 1999-2007*