**Ideas and Society Program**

**Why is the Labor Party in Crisis?**

**Wednesday 2 May 2012**

**Marilyn Lake**

Good afternoon and thanks very much for all of you coming. I’m sure this is going to be a really interesting and informative and even exciting discussion, and it’s clearly a very timely and important subject. And in fact I was thinking, since the announcement of this forum and it being held today, you know, for the Labor Party, things only seem to have got worse, and we’ve heard just in the last day or two that the Coalition’s prospective vote seems to have been higher than it’s been for a very long time, and Labor’s lower.

­We have three speakers and they’re going to speak in order of Antony Green, and then Robert Manne and Barry Jones. You will know all of them, at least by sight. So I’ll introduce them quickly to orient you to where they’re coming from, what they’re going to say.

Antony Green, the first speaker, one of Australia’s most respected party political analysts has been the ABC’s election analyst since the early 1990s, where most of you might know him from. He publishes an extremely informative political blog.

Robert Manne, you will also know. He’s a Professor in Politics here at La Trobe, a well known commentator on public affairs and the convenor of this very successful Ideas and Society Program.

And then, finally, our speaker will be Barry Jones, who represented the ALP in the Victorian Legislative Assembly in the 1970s and the House of Representatives between 1977 and 1998. He was a Minister for Science in the Hawke government, and twice the Labor Party’s National President. He’s the only person to be elected to all four Australian learned academies.

So please welcome our speakers.

[applause]

So Antony, over to you.

**Antony Green**

I’ll just make sure this is working. Before I start, I’ve got a few graphs. I’m afraid that numbers and graphs, numbers and graphs talk to me, it’s people I have difficulty understanding sometimes. I’m going to start off, I’m going to talk a little bit less about the Labor Party and a bit more about party systems. I’ll let Robert and Barry talk more about the internal dynamics of the Labor Party and what it’s for.

Around the world, there’s many different countries with different party systems, but as a rough categorisation, most party systems have a significant party who stands for the status quo, whatever the status quo is at the time, and then one or more parties who tend to want change, want a shift away from the status quo. In the Australian case, there’s been a rock solid Coalition for many decades, and on the opposition, a Labor Party. Occasionally the Labor Party has been the party of the status quo and it’s the Liberal Party actually trying to be the radical reform party. But as a rough general rule, you can say that there’s a conservative party for the status quo in Australia, and the Labor Party more about change.

But in the modern era, parties aren’t what they used to be. It’s been a very, very long time since Australia’s parties were really mass-based and Australian political parties have always had a smaller mass base than other countries. In large part, that’s due to the fact that we have compulsory voting and that the parties don’t need to turn out the vote, that the state actually ensures that everybody turns out to vote. So if you haven’t got a mass-based party, what sort of party do you want? Do you want a catch-all party, that deals with all sorts of issues? Do you want a cadre party, a party which is basically a mechanism to try and get into political office? And doesn’t really have much connection below that level, which is essentially what some of our political parties, especially the Labor Party, have sort of become in recent years. And also we’re trying to deal with a different era of politics, that class politics isn’t what it used to be. That the traditional blue collar workers that you used to see, the miners, the dock workers, those sorts of jobs, are actually much better paid than your average worker these days, and often are more influenced by things like taxation policy than they are by awards and conditions, given they are actually quite well paid. So the whole structure of the sort of class systems that used to exist in Australia have been significantly changed, yet Australia has one of the most … most of the world’s political systems have basically had the same parties since the 1920s, with few exceptions like Canada and Belgium, but to a large extent the parties have been roughly the same for many decades. And in Australia, rigidly the same. We still have basically the same three parties that we had, major parties, that we had at the end of the First World War, and the shift away from them has been quite small.

But what’s been happening to the Labor Party recently? Well, we’re seeing that shift away from traditional party ties and we’re also seeing that people are less tied to their party. We’re seeing things like trust in leadership increasing, we seeing in an era where people aren’t tied to the image of their party, they’re often tied to the image of the leader. And so the issues of leaders and whether a leader can be trusted is becoming more and more important to politics. And you can see pretty obviously in the way rhetoric is running in federal politics at the moment.

And then there’s the peculiarity that I’m speaking to a Victorian audience here, and you’re talking about the Labor Party in crisis – if we had this discussion in New South Wales at the moment, I can guarantee you that the entire debate would be tied up about whether you should privatise electricity or not. You just cannot have a discussion about Labor Party reform without an argument going on about privatisation of electricity. And I think one of the points I’ll come back later is, is the Labor Party internally capable of making some decisions that are required from time to time? In Victoria, the Labor Party *didn’t* have to make the decision – the Kennett government made that decision and with that decision having been made, a whole area of debate within the party gets removed and the party can move on. So a debate of this sort in Victoria, to me, is quite a foreign language compared to what’s happening in Queensland or New South Wales at the moment.

Now what I’m going to do, I’m going to start with a quote. I’m not going to tell you when, but I think you’ll find it interesting. This was the day or two before an election, the day before this paper had published a whole series of profiles of the Labor candidates for the election and then the next day opined on what some future historian from the University of Longreach would think, looking back on this era, of the Labor candidates. And he said, “if the file of yesterday’s issues survives to that remote age, the historian will look and find amongst the Labor candidates barristers, solicitors, clergymen, agents, land agents, teachers, clerks and contractors”, which immediately tells you it’s not a current newspaper, because you don’t have those professions nowadays. But the rest of the quote is what’s interesting. “The historian will then be able to conclude only that the title of the party was deliberately invented to lead him astray, and that whatever the aims and objectives of the party were, the amelioration of the masses by the masses, was not included among them. And he will not be far wrong. The inception of the Labor Party has good reason on its side. It was felt that the worker should have some direct chance of self expression in parliament and with that, we still most heartily agree. Unluckily, political Labor soon began to leave the worker out of the question. It became the peculiar goal of the professional politician, who thus found a source of income exceeding his wildest dreams. Henceforth, the main thing was to get returned, and the good of the worker became less of an object than the chance of successfully exploiting him. So we find all sorts of conditions of men in the pseudo Labor ranks. And it’s not hard to guess why they are there. The fact of the matter is of course that political Labor is bound to be a delusion and a fraud. However well introduced, the Labor politician may be intentioned when the Labor politician starts his career, some of those who seem so incongruously assorted in the catalogue, are doubtless well-meaning enthusiasts, with a weakness for academic socialism. They have yet to learn what the tyranny of Trades Hall means. But they are bound to learn sooner or later and then they have the choice of becoming hypocrites or liberals.” That was the *Sydney Morning Herald* in September 28, 1910, accusing the Labor Party of having deserted its roots.

The interesting thing coming to this forum was that so much of the media treats everything in politics as new, so the decline in the Labor Party is suddenly new, and anyone who has done history over the years, knows that this crisis comes along from time to time. The crisis isn’t always the same. It’s a different crisis now than it was in the ‘60s, or it was in the 1920s, but essentially these crises come along every so often. The party that founded in the 1890s in New South Wales was definitely a working class party representing workers. The states are all slightly different but I’ll speak by New South Wales, which I’m most familiar with. The first thirteen years of its history it held the balance of power in the parliament and traded off its vote for conditions for workers. And then suddenly in 1904 with the disappearance of three-party politics, the Labor Party, the remorselessly working class party, found itself the party of the Opposition. They were the Opposition. If they wanted to get anything achieved in the future, what did they do? And what the Labor Party did from 1904 to 1910 in New South Wales is not well documented, the period thirteen years before is, was it became much more middle class, and in 1910 it had former Liberals, former Free Traders and ex-people who had been kicked out of the Labor Party suddenly as candidates. It was trying to become a bigger party to expand beyond its small base. And to take a modern reference, it’s something the Greens have yet to do. They are still trapped in their base. How do they expand beyond that if they are to become a real party. If the Labor Party wanted to achieve anything, it had to become a broader party. And that debate about the middle class nature of the party has continued from time to time. If you look at Gough Whitlam, the quote that you’ll hear occasionally is Kim Beazley senior saying that once the Labor Party was the party of the best of the working class, and now it’s the dregs of the middle class. Of course, Gough Whitlam in 1970, Don Aitken the political scientist, wrote that the Labor Party was trapped by being unattractive to women, unattractive to migrants and unattractive to young people. And in the 1960s, that was a good description of the Labor Party. It had very little appeal to females, especially young females. It wasn’t the party of migrants in the 1960s, and was an endlessly working class party. Whitlam made it more of a middle class party.

So when people talk about what the party is, it’s often a battle of the party the people are talking about. Is it the working class party, which is still its rhetoric? Or is it the middle class party of radicalism, which is really harking back to the Whitlam era. And what we’re seeing now in the modern Labor Party is a bit of a working out of that.

Now, why I was interested in this topic was that when I started studying politics three decades ago, one of the major theses of politics was the Labor Party was a party that only came to office occasionally when the conservatives stuffed up. And they’d come to office, shake up a few institutions, usually preside over a financial disaster, and then be tossed out and the proper people were back in charge. And up until 1980, that was a pretty good description of how Labor governed in most of the states and federally. And what’s happened since 1980, and sort of most current commentary tends to miss, is that the Labor Party’s had more success in the last three decades than at any time in its history, and in particular, in the last ten years, it’s had more success.

Now I think the reason Robert invited me along to this, was this graph that I put on my blog recently, which was the percentage of seats won by Labor at state and federal elections over the last … since 1950. Now you can see in the mid ‘50s, there on the left hand side of the graph, a bit of a blip up, the unpopularity of the Menzies government, Labor reaching majority government in Victoria for the first time, its long runs in New South Wales and Queensland, the Labor Party reached 55% of all seats in parliament around the country. And then the split happened. Big drop. Labor didn’t sort of get a majority of seats around the country again until the early 1980s, when the Labor Party in Victoria finally recovered. A long period in the wilderness there, and as you can see there, one of the key things about that graph is that every time, since 1970, you’ve had a party government of one side or the other, has been a golden era for the Opposition in state politics.

And that’s made even clearer on the next one. This is just a proportion of state seats held by the Labor Party, and the same trend appears. Every time – the colour’s actually not very clear on that graph – when the Whitlam government was in power, Labor lost seats in the states. When the Fraser government was in power, Labor rose to a new peak in the early 1980s. When Hawke was in power, they fell. Howard was in power, Labor reached new heights – the highest number of seats in its history, in the early part of the last decade. And then since, it’s fallen off a cliff, with a Labor government federally. Why? Well, that’s something to discuss. I’ll skip past that. That’s not what I want to talk about now.

This is a simple graph of the Labor Party’s vote. It’s a bit hard to see. At the top there, I’ve got the Labor and Liberal vote since 1975, the last … 1975 is the last great two-party election. The Labor Party vote is consistently below the Liberals, the Coalition on first preference in recent years. In 1993, they outpolled the Coalition, in 1998, in the face of One Nation, Labor outpolled the Coalition, and when the Rudd government won in 2007, Labor was ahead.

And the next graph, I’ve converted those minor party votes – you can see the Greens increased in that graph. I’ve broken the minor parties into preferences instead. Down the bottom there’s a pink and a dashed blue line. That shows the proportion of preferences from minor parties going to the two major parties. Labor’s first preference vote’s been declining – its core support has been declining, but it’s been picking up votes as second preferences. This is a peculiarity of the Australian system. This would be a major disaster for Labor under any first-past-the-post system, and has been a disaster for New South Wales and Queensland Labor under optional preference voting. But under federal Labor, with compulsory preferential voting, the fact of Labor’s loss of core support has fed back to it its preferences, has meant the disaster hasn’t been quite so obvious, until their first preference vote really hit the cliff.

This is a graph of New South Wales – a bit complex unfortunately. The Labor Party has had a really strong sixteen years in office, but its first preference vote, under Bob Carr, he never outpolled the Labor Party in four defeats to Robert Askin in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The Labor Party first preference vote has barely budged since 1985 in New South Wales. And what saved Labor was preferences, that Labor has got preferences from minor parties. So we’re seeing the Labor Party losing its core support elsewhere. And I’ll get onto this issue of core support.

I also want to talk about the issue of volatility in politics. At the federal level, we are still seeing the traditional party ties of ideology keeping the party base in its levels. But what we’ve seen at state level is increased volatility. If people aren’t as tied to their party and the ideological content of state politics has diminished, people are more likely to vote on performance. State governments are about delivering things, and if a government doesn’t deliver, people vote against it, even if they don’t agree with the ideology of their opponents. And this is another one of these odd graphs, but this is two party preferred vote in New South Wales at state and federal elections since 1950. The dashed line is at a federal result in New South Wales two party preferred, and the thick black line is the state result. Up until the mid ‘70s there was a strong correspondence there and not much shift either way from fifty. And the federal level has continued at that – between 45 and 55% two party preferred, the ideological component has kept the parties level. At the state level, wide variations. Under Neville Wran, Labor got up above 60% two party preferred. They crashed in the ‘80s. They rose up under Bob Carr again, and again, of course, most recently were smashed. At state level, what you’re seeing, and we’ve seen it again in Queensland recently, people are voting against their traditional party tie, because they’re voting on performance. The ideology is less important. The question is, will this flow through to federal politics at the next election? Will the traditional ideology hold through? Does Labor still have its base at the federal level, or is it going to be a repeat of some of the state elections?

Now I want to show the graph of Victoria, because it is utterly different from this graph here. And some of the older people in this room will well know why. This is the two party preferred vote for Labor at elections since 1950, and you can see that long period of Labor underneath which covers that whole existence of the DLP. When the Labor Party split, and Labor was unelectable in Victoria. But since 1980, the big turnaround for Labor across Australia is because Labor in Victoria has become like the rest of the country. Victoria has become like the rest of the country.

Some of the younger people in this room probably won’t realise that John Cain and Joan Kirner in the 1980s, spent longer in power … sorry, I correct myself, in office, not necessarily in power, they spent longer in office than every Labor government in eighty years of Victorian history beforehand. So Victoria has become more like the rest of the country, but again, I point out that black line there, diverges from much more than 50% than any of the federal results in recent years have. We’re seeing again people are prepared to vote for somebody else at state level. There’s less ideological component than there used to be.

Now this is a rather complex graph. The reason why is because one of the reasons that’s driving the Labor Party problem is the existence of the Greens. This is a scatter diagram, one of those great things that people get baffled about, but this is Labor two party preferred vote from Coalition favour on the left to Labor favour on the right. And the Y axis going up is the percentage of first preference vote for the Greens. What you see there, and some of them I’ve labelled, down the right hand side and you probably can’t read them unless you’ve got really good eyesight. But up the top right there, Melbourne, the highest Green vote, the highest Labor two party preferred vote. The other high seats there on Labor two party preferred are seats like Batman, Grayndler, Wills – Sydney and Grayndler are inner city seats in Sydney, Batman and Wills of course, inner city Melbourne, Gelibrand and then Gorton, Scullin, Labor. Gorton, Scullin, Labor, Lawler, Scullin, Gorton – the Green vote is much lower, much higher in Melbourne, Grayndler, in Batman, Wills. Now some of you will obviously know one of the differences – they’re just inner versus outer suburban. The Greens have far less appeal in far outer suburban cities than they do in the inner suburbs. Particularly in Western Sydney, people want to drive their four wheel drives, they want air conditioning and a party that wants to put up the price of power and the price of petrol doesn’t have a lot of appeal to the life expectations of those people. But there’s another reason why that graph looks like that, with Melbourne, Grayndler, Batman up the top, Gorton, Scullin, Labor, and I’ll make this my last major graph. Gaff, even. Look at the right there – Melbourne. This is the proportion, first preference votes for the Greens against the proportion of the electorate that is university educated. Up there, top right, Melbourne, look at them, Grayndler, Sydney, Batman, Wills, Melbourne Ports, Canberra – all up the top there. Down buried in the bottom left there amongst all the dots, you find Lawler, Scullin and Gorton. That’s the difference. This is one of the key social characteristic differences between why the Greens, where the Greens get a high vote and where they don’t. With the exception of Tasmania, where different politics apply, inner city seats where the university educated people – where the Greens do well. And I remember Lindsay Tanner saying to me, one of the problems the Greens present for the Labor Party in the inner city is the urban educated, inner city elites that were brought into the Labor Party by Gough Whitlam, are now departing the Labor Party. More cynically, Graham Richardson once referred to the Labor Party outsourcing its left wing. Two expressions of the same thing. But what you’re seeing is the Labor Party is in a cleft. It’s caught between a traditional appeal to working voters, standing up for workers, and that’s what they’re campaigning on. And they’ve also got this other educated group, what is more radical in its thought amongst other things, so you’re seeing a divide between trying to make sure that people who are working get enough income to have a good life, as opposed to somebody who wants to get out there and campaign for gay marriage. I mean, these are very different issues and have different appeals in different parts of the electorate. And the Labor Party is trying a difficulty, in trying to sort of straddle this divide in its support base. And you’ve got the Greens there, competing in its safest seats for a segment that previously was locked into the Labor Party.

So I’ll go right back to my first graph of the proportion of state seats there. I published this on my website saying that some of politics is cyclical. Some people who have been saying the Labor Party is dying are actually people who are in glee about a new conservative hegemony that they’re going to suddenly dominate the country and all these horrible other thoughts and the conservatives are the true faith of the future. Now some of this, I think is rubbish. Some of this is cyclical. Some time in a couple of years time a conservative government is going to stuff things up and it will get tossed out of government. The question is, who’s there to benefit when it happens? Is it going to be the Labor Party as we know it now? Is it a Labor Party built around the principles of laborism, which is the traditional Australian way as opposed to social welfare, or socialism which is more of an overseas ideology? Is it going to be the Labor Party still with a strong union connection? Or is it going to be something more like social democracy? Is it going to be a new left wing coalition between a Greens party and something like a Labor Party? The Labor Party’s not going to disappear but is it going to be as relevant and important as it was in the past? And why is that downturn occurring right at the end of the graph? Is it caused by the Labor Party’s internal problems? Is it caused by shifting allegiances? Is it caused by a new volatility in the electorate? I mean, everyone keeps saying more voters change their mind from election to election, well, one of the consequences of that is bigger swings. Or is it a short term factor? Do we have an incompetent federal government? Is it trying to sell something in the carbon tax which is complete anathema to its working class base? Do we have a Prime Minister with a tin ear? These are all issues which are factoring in. In the next year, that graph is going to drop off the bottom and the Labor Party in terms of seats in parliament will be at its worst level in probably 80 or 90 years. Its vote will be down at the lowest level that it’s been in 80 or 90 years. Can it recover? I think some of the return to the Labor Party will be cyclical, but I think the people speaking after me will be talking about more structural issues that the Labor Party has. And I hope I’ve been a useful introduction to today’s talk.

[applause]

**Marilyn Lake**

Our next speaker is Robert Manne and I should just say, the idea is that each speaker speaks for about up to twenty minutes and then there’ll be interpanel discussion and then we have time to open it up to you, to ask questions and make comments. So, Robert.

**Robert Manne**

The most dramatic moment of the talk is me trying to get down this step. Which I’ll do. Sorry about that. And I’d very much like to thank Antony for his extremely interesting talk. I really would love to have Antony in our department, doing this sort of psephological work. Interesting, too, just in the history of our department, Antony is now, he told me before, working on preferential voting and the person whose work he’s gone back to, is one of our very early professors, Joan Rydon, which is nice to know.

I’ll be really leading very much from where Antony left off and dealing with the issue that he said we were going to next turn to, just by accident.

Almost everyone now acknowledges that if Julia Gillard leads the federal Labor Party at the next election, the ALP will suffer overwhelming defeat. Since July last year, and the month is important, support for the Labor Party, according to the Newspoll and A C Neilson, has been dismal. The Gillard government’s primary vote has pretty consistently fallen below 30%. The last poll, a couple of days ago, 27%. Its two party preferred vote has averaged less than 45% … a couple of days ago, 41%. For the party and the nation, the crucial question seems to me, is to try to discover why. And it’s because I thought that the combination of Barry and Antony would add something that I called this forum, and I really would like to try and get somewhere on this question today.

Most analyses of the question tend to favour long term structural weaknesses, or ideological dilemmas. I think everyone here will be aware of the kind that I’m referring to. Let me go through them very briefly. We are told that the influence of the trade unions in the party is too great. We are told that the functioning and the reputation of the party has been damaged by the system of formal factions, and faction leaders, that was introduced in the 1980s and which is now out of control. We are told that the quality of Labor members of parliament has deteriorated because at present, in general, time servers from the unions or from the ranks of political advisors, are the only people that have a chance of winning pre-selection for the seats that might be won. We are told that the influence of the party branches has all but disappeared, and that as a result, the branches are moribund, except when they are stacked for purposes of winning a pre-selection. We are told that Labor has lost far too many of its traditional working class supporters, its traditional base. We are told that idealistic people, especially the young, have deserted the Labor Party, both as members and voters and have defected to the Greens. We are told that the party has lost its ideological identity, having absorbed and adopted the two dominant right of centre ideological strands within the contemporary Anglophone world, that is to say, neo-liberalism and populist conservatism. We are even sometimes told that the Labor Party is a particular example of a more general crisis of social democratic parties throughout the Western world, in an age where the entitlements established by the post-war welfare state, can no longer be afforded.

Now I don’t want to be misunderstood on the next point I make. There is obvious strength and indeed, plausibility, in all these claims. None of the claims I have just made, I think, is unimportant. But before accepting them as an explanation for the current crisis, there is however, one overwhelming problem. All these structural weaknesses existed during the period of the Rudd government. And yet, according to the opinion polls, for its 30 months of office, the Rudd government was perhaps the most popular government in Australian history, since the polls began to be taken. I defer to Antony on this, if I’m wrong, he will correct me.

Where the Gillard government’s average Newspoll first preference vote, over its 21 months of office has been under 33%, its two party preferred vote has averaged 46%, Rudd’s average first preference vote was 43%, his two party preferred vote averaged 56%, in both cases, about ten percentage higher. Despite the structural weaknesses and the ideological dilemmas of the ALP, Labor consecutively has produced arguably the most popular, and arguably the least popular government in post-war Australia.

I want to now argue something that might appear strange. In contemporary democracies, where the role of the media is so dominant, where the ideological distance between the parties has been reduced, where, as Antony said, far fewer voters are rusted on to one or another party, immediate influences and ephemeral matters are often more determinative than deeper and more interesting structural or ideological questions, of the kind I just mentioned.

To understand the current crisis of Labor, analysis of matters that run deep may mislead. I’m struck by the incredible, Kundera unbearable lightness or even superficiality of citizens’ relationship to the democratic process. We are often told that the 30 seconds on the evening news, are the most important political moment of the day, for both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition. We are often now told, and we didn’t use to be, but we are now told, in a phrase that interests me, that people have ceased to listen to the Prime Minister, even though, as we all know, her government has still a potential eighteen months of life to run. In a vigorous democracy of course, things would be very different. Or even in a democracy which was under threat, like, let’s say, Israel, thinks it’s under threat – I don’t think the citizens would ever cease to listen in this way. If the case I’m making is true, what is necessary is unembarrassed emphasis on short term factors and a surface of political life.

It is for this reason that I want to argue that the contemporary crisis of Labor is best explained through an analysis of an interconnected series of blunders or misjudgements that all occurred within the space of a few months in 2010.

At the beginning of 2010, the Rudd government was weakened by two problems and campaigns led by the Murdoch press, especially the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Australian*. These were the return of asylum seeker boats, and weaknesses revealed in administration of its generally popular and successful post-financial crisis stimulus program – the two problems regarding school buildings and home insulation. I would argue however, that neither of these problems was even remotely potentially fatal to the government. The real troubles began over climate change policy. The Rudd government, for understandable reasons, had decided to trust the Coalition and to cold-shoulder the Greens in negotiations leading to its most important piece of legislation – the emissions trading scheme. Rudd placed faith in the capacity of Malcolm Turnbull to deliver bi-partisan support. When Turnbull lost the Liberal Party leadership in November 2009, and when Tony Abbott made it clear that the Coalition would oppose the climate change legislation, the Rudd government began to lose its way.

I think we can now see that Rudd could have, and should have, opted for a double dissolution and negotiations with the Greens. Instead, he allowed members of his cabinet, including his deputy, Julia Gillard, to talk him into postponing the emissions trading scheme for the next three years. Badly stung by the response within the political nation, not the electorate, but those politically engaged citizens, a small minority, to the argument that he believed in nothing, Rudd now attempted to prove that he did believe in something by announcing his government’s commitment to the Ken Henry suggestion of a resource rent mining tax. The error here in my view, was not with the decision, but with the absence of political nous, at the moment of announcement. Rudd needed to prepare the ground more carefully. He might have commissioned for example, a White Paper on how not to squander the resources boom. In the way the mining tax was announced, Rudd underestimated the ruthlessness and the deep pockets of the mining interests. He underestimated the ideological enmity of the Murdoch press, especially the *Australian*, and he underestimated his unpopularity among his parliamentary colleagues.

What happened next proved to be crucial or has proved to be crucial to any analysis of Labor’s current crisis. In June 2010, the Rudd government, in my view, still had not lost the trust of the electorate. In the last six Newspolls, taken before the coup, in inverted commas, only once did the two party preferred vote for the Rudd government, fall below 50%. Indeed, just before the coup, it was 52%. There is a lot of ruin in governments. They can withstand many errors and bad patches. By June 2010, there was in my view, for Rudd, still time for repair. Nonetheless, his caucus colleagues decided to remove one of the more popular Prime Ministers in recent Australian history.

There were two main consequences of the swift and secretive unseating of Kevin Rudd. The coup made it impossible for the Labor government to run on its record at the next election. More importantly, the rather sinister qualities surrounding the coup, instantly revived the old Menzies canard that the Labor Party was a party run by faceless men. Although feeling about the matter probably does not run deep, the Australian people has never in my view understood why Rudd was removed. Two years after the coup, he remains almost twice as popular as his successor, even now, even after he lost the leadership ballot.

What happened next is, I think, most difficult of all to explain. Having convinced Rudd to postpone the emissions trading scheme legislation, having promised the electorate that her government had no intention of introducing a carbon tax, Prime Minister Gillard now signed an agreement with the Greens for the creation of a parliamentary committee to broker the outlines of a carbon tax/emissions trading scheme. Given the problems this has created, Gillard’s thinking is almost impossible to fathom. On the one hand, if Gillard did believe in the need for a carbon price, why had she convinced Rudd to postpone for three years? On the other hand, if she did not, why did she agree to a negotiating process with the Greens? Gillard could not argue political necessity. There was no possibility that in the absence of an agreement, the one Greens member of the House, Adam Bandt, would have supported an Abbott government. By talking Rudd into postponing his climate change legislation, Gillard helped destroy Rudd’s reputation, at least in the political nation. By promising the Australian people before the election that her government would not introduced a carbon tax, and then signing an agreement shortly after, leading to one, she helped destroy her own.

Gillard outlined her carbon tax legislation in July 2011. It is I think no accident that it was in July that her government’s already poor public opinion polls went into freefall. Gillard was not only introducing a new tax, whose absolutely vital necessity for the future wellbeing of the earth, in my view, she seemed incapable of explaining or dramatising. That’s why I think a double dissolution would have been crucial. It would have dramatised what was at stake. But not only could she not dramatise why she was doing this, she was also easily characterised as “a liar”.

The deeper question here is, for me, how are these interconnected errors of 2010 to be explained. At one level the explanation might be thought to rest on weaknesses of leadership, something Antony has said rightly I think, has become increasingly important in politics in our country, and elsewhere. Even the greatest supporter of Rudd cannot deny that he was in part brought down by faults of character – rudeness, an inconsiderateness, incapacity to win the trust of colleagues, insensitivity or indifference to the power of faction leaders inside the party, inability to manage a team, and so on. Even the greatest support of Gillard ought not to deny that despite the real legislative achievements of her government, and her negotiating skills, that she has little capacity to explain her vision, or to find the phrase, as Bob Hawke and Paul Keating were often able to do, that dramatises her government’s program and her ambition. Yet the current crisis of Labor in my view has another dimension. In their different ways, both Rudd and Gillard stumbled over the politics of climate change. This is hardly surprising. The issue is dauntingly difficult, in some ways more difficult than any issue I’ve ever seen in Australian politics, requiring governments to restructure the energy economy for the sake of future generations and the earth, but without being able to promise their people material improvement, or, in the absence of equal contributions from other nations, any certainty of success.

The climate change difficulties both Rudd and Gillard faced are moreover, obviously connected to the rise of Tony Abbott, a leader of the Coalition who has assured the Australian people that no serious action on climate change is required. In my view, this is profoundly wrong, even perhaps wicked from the ethically point of view, but has been highly effective politically. Abbott has appealed to the preoccupation with material comfort of the character type that is fostered by the consumer society and by their self-interested climate change scepticism. He has benefited greatly from the cultural victory of the fossil fuel industry-inspired climate change denialists in the United States, Canada and Australia that has occurred, especially since the failure of the Copenhagen Conference in late 2009. And in his indifference to any real climate change action, Abbott has also greatly benefited from the explicit support of the Murdoch press, that owns between 65 and 70% of statewide and national newspaper circulation in Australia.

Now, I’ve lived long enough to have seen two great cultural shifts in Australia – the abandonment of the White Australia Policy from the late 1960s, and the deregulation of the economy from the 1980s. Both succeeded without great friction because of effective bi-partisan support. Moving Australia from a fossil fuel to a clean energy economy is a transformation no less fundamental. It had bi-partisan support while Kevin Rudd was Prime Minister and Malcolm Turnbull was leader of the Opposition. When Abbott replaced Turnbull, the possibility of that kind of smooth transition was lost, we have to say, I hope, at least temporarily.

We are now destined for another period of populist conservative Coalition rule, unless something quite peculiar takes place. Even though the collapse of Labor is not in my view to be explained with reference to the structural weaknesses or ideological confusions of the party, during the coming period of opposition, the ALP should act finally to clarify its ambitions and to put its house in order.

I do not think it likely that the looming landslide will affect the more than century long two party, Labor and non-Labor division of Australian politics. In combination, the proportional representation system in the Senate and the preferential voting system in the House of Representatives, does provide favourable conditions for the emergence of minor third parties like the DLP, the Democrats, One Nation and now the Greens. However, and I think Antony was saying this as well, on present indications there is little prospect of the Greens, whose core support is among the inner city professionals, and which seems to have hit a 15% ceiling, there’s little prospect of it replacing Labor in my view, as the second party, of what is naturally a two party system.

From the point of view of the Labor Party, my conclusion then has both pessimistic and optimistic elements. In the immediate future its crisis is now so fundamental and intractable that it is almost impossible to see how, even with another change of leadership, it can avoid a lengthy period in the wilderness at the federal level. In circumstances that cannot now be predicted, eventually however, its fortunes will revive and it will return to government. In my view, and here I become unrealistic for the first time in the talk, in informal alliance with the Greens, and with a popular mandate to strengthen the Australian welfare state, and tackle the fundamental question of our era, the looming catastrophe of climate change, but before any of that might happen, there are I’m afraid many years to go. Thank you.

[applause]

**Marilyn Lake**

Thanks very much Robert. And now we have Barry Jones. Please welcome Barry Jones.

[applause]

**Barry Jones**

Well, Marilyn and friends, in a sense I think I’m probably going to take a more, a slightly depressing view, compared to the sunny optimism of the previous speakers.

I’m inclined to take the view that the government, the federal government, is actually in better shape than the party is. You could argue, it won’t necessarily be rewarded at the next election, you could argue that in fact the legislative record of the parliament that was elected in 2010, is impressive. A very large number of pieces of legislation have been carried, a lot of them are very worthwhile, and they have been … the government has never been defeated on a matter affecting legislation. And the budgets generally speaking have been good budgets, although I think the emphasis on getting a budget surplus, whatever the circumstances, borders on the obsessional.

But the problem is this, in some ways I would argue that the government has been strengthened by the fact that it’s had a minority government rather than a majority in its own right. I suspect that if the government had been returned with a small majority in its own right, a majority perhaps of two or three on the floor in its own right, it would have been panic stricken. It would have been panic stricken because every issue that was potentially unpopular, like for example, the carbon pricing legislation, would have meant that every single member in a marginal seat would have said, don’t touch it. Don’t touch it – it’s electoral poison. Let’s stay away from it. But in fact, the way in which the parliamentary committee operated with both the Greens, but also the Independents, meant that the issue that was put to the government, after the election, was to say, do you want to be in power or not? Or rather, do you want to be in office or not? If you want to be in office, then these are the issues that you’ve got to legislate on. If you don’t want to be in office, that’s a different matter. But I have a very strong sense, and a number of my colleagues inside the parliamentary party are of the same view, that if the government had just had that narrow majority in its own right, then it would have been extremely nervous to say, we can’t afford to offend the miners, we can’t afford to offend the people in the coal industry, we can’t afford to offend any kind of sectional group.

I’m interested always in the analysis, the very profound analysis, that Antony produces, and of course his diagrams, which I’d already downloaded some of his diagrams from material already published, and they’re very valuable. And he’s certainly correct to point to the fact that there have been times where there’s been a collapse in the Labor vote and people said, oh it’s doom and gloom, we’re all ruined, the party will never recover. But there are two or three things that I think need to be talked about. It’s curious – Antony did that quotation from 1910, and how people were then predicting doom for the Labor Party at that time. But I’ll tell you a curious thing about 1910 which he might work into the next iteration of his paper. I’d ask him the question, when do you think there were more people, members of the New South Wales Labor Party? In the year 1910, or the year 2012? The answer is, there were far more people who were members of the Labor Party in 1910, although the population of the country has increased 450% since then. The point was, that historically the party, even though it suffered grievous setbacks and was defeated very heavily and with the splits of 1916 and the split of 1931, and the split of 1955, it nevertheless retained a strong connection with the electorate at large. The problem now is that the party is losing that connection with the electorate at large. My friend Rodney Cavalier, former Education Minister in New South Wales, says of the New South Wales Labor Party, I remember a memorable phrase, that it no longer satisfies the breath on the mirror test. That if you apply … he urged them to apply their breath to the mirror, nothing comes through. If you look at a map of New South Wales and look at the areas where there are now no longer any Labor Party branches, you can see that there’s now such a sense of disconnection, such a disconnection with the community as a whole. You see, if you take the case of the relationship with the Labor Party with the trade union movement, or as we used to say, the great trade union movement. Trade unions … membership of trade unions began to decline as a percentage of the total working force, in the year 1954. 1954 was the peak year. After 58 years, it’s starting to look like the beginning of a trend. By the end of the next century, you know, the situation will be clarified. So the difficulty is, that the challenge for the Labor Party – the Labor Party has managed to achieve incumbency and under the circumstances that Robert talked about, and I’ll say something about that in a minute – the difficulty is, when the Labor Party loses incumbency, in every political entity in Australia, which theoretically could happen, the question is, what are the resources that it uses to pick itself up? Is it possible for a party with a contracting base to have an expanding reach? I don’t quite see how. I’d like to think it did. But it’s very difficult to see how a party with a contracting base can have that expanding reach.

In 1992, 43% of the labour force was unionised, sorry 43% of the male labour force was unionised. 35% of the female. By 2011, the figures had dropped in each category, male and female, to 18. So you’ve got a very sharp … a very sharp contraction and in fact the difference is that the whole structure of the Labor Party and I couldn’t agree more with what Robert said, that there have been times when the party structure’s been pretty terrible, but we’ve still managed to win elections. The problem is, if you reach the stage where you’re out of office anyway, and you don’t have the benefits of incumbency, such as they are, they’re very difficult … it’s difficult to work out how you work your way back. And you can see that … I mean, if you thought, for example, that you were going to try and persuade people to rejoin the party, or in fact join the party for the first time, it’s very difficult to know what you would sell them. You see, if you said to people, please join the party because these are the things we stand for. If you join the party, you can help get stuck into the refugees. We can support the private school system very loyally, we’ve got an absolute devotion to the free market, we will promise to delay the republic, we’ll reject the Charter of Rights, we’ll have uncritical support of US foreign policy, we certainly won’t say anything to the churches about child abuse, we’ll have low priority research science and the arts, and we’ll do very little about the environment. You say, isn’t that irresistible? Isn’t that irresistible? How could one possibly reject the suggestion? Well, people will say, no, give me a handful of party booklets and I’ll sign up all my friends. In fact, since I belong to a football club, by the end of the week, they’ll be members. They won’t turn up, but they’ll be there somewhere.

No, the difficulty is that the whole structure of society has changed very much and the party theoretically represents a kind of political division of power which perhaps doesn’t exist any more. If you’re not familiar with it, and I’ll give it to Robert so he can put it on his website, but there was an outstanding piece by the British sociologist, Garry Runciman, which was called, *What Happened to the Labour Party?* L-A-B-O-U-R in his case. It was in the *London Review of Books*, Garry Runciman is a very distinguished British sociologist who also happens to be a member of the House of Lords and a millionaire ship owner, but he’s a man of very profound insights. And what he was writing about, the Labour Party, the British Party, and our party, is similar. He was making the comparison, and I really should have prepared to have one of those wonderful diagrams like the ones that Antony has, but I will make it just by simple hand movements. But his argument was, if you compared the Labor Party say, the Labour Party of Clement Attlee in 1950, 1945, 1950 thereabouts, then say the British Labour Party in the early 21st century, you’re really talking about two completely different societies. If you were going to represent diagrammatically the structure, the division of wealth and power and influence in society, then the traditional idea of a pyramid, of an equilateral pyramid, is probably pretty accurate, because you had a comparatively small number of people right at the top, and as you went down further, further, further, down towards the bottom, the numbers in fact became greater. So that if you were really thinking about the kind of thing that Attlee was persuading people to get out and vote in ’45, to say we’re talking about decent schools, we’re talking about decent hospitals, and trying to pull people out of poverty. But, when you go to the Blair period, you’re not looking at a social structure that’s really like a pyramid, you’re really looking more like the shape of a diamond, that you’ve got a significant number of people at the top, at the very bottom you’ve probably got, well, you do have, a sharply contracting number of people at the absolute bottom, in absolute poverty. And that’s a wonderful thing and that’s a thing to be welcomed. The largest area is in fact at the edges of the diamond. In the middle. So that when people, when people come along and ask Labour members and say, look, you’re not going to do anything that removes … that takes away tax advantage, for sending children to private schools. Toby and Miranda have special needs. And because of that, we’re prepared to vote Labour because we’ve got a bit of a family history, a family tradition, but we don’t want the Labour Party coming in, taking away those benefits. So the result is, we’re really looking for a situation where … we have a situation at the moment where the winning and losing of elections depends so much on those seats in the middle, the seats where people don’t identify themselves with historical stereotypes, and this is why the Labor Party really has to rethink what it is and where it’s going.

One of the failures that was not mentioned by Robert, which he could have, was the absolute failure at the national conference at the end of 2010, to look at the social implications of the report that was brought down by Bracks and Faulkner and Carr, it would have at least been a first step, a first step towards moving the party away from being an oligarchy, to being a democratic structure, which it is not now. And that may be one of the things that really does doom the Labor Party.

[applause]

**Marilyn Lake**

Thank you, well, I’m sure you will agree that we’ve got such a wealth of explanations as to why the Labor Party and the government is in such dire straits, ranging from the structural to the historical, to the party systems, to lack of conviction and lack of communicative skills. I just … Robert in particular sort of had an emphasis on lack of conviction and a lack of intellectual grasp really of climate change issues and the ability to communicate the importance of those. I just wonder, before we open it right up, if you might all comment on whether or not, and Robert also emphasised the more recent, if you like, at the expense of the longer term historical structural issues, whether the Labor Party and the government might be in better shape if we actually had more charismatic, convincing leaders in the Labor Party.

**Robert Manne**

Yes, I am struck, even now, if Paul Keating or Bob Hawke are interviewed, how they can find a phrase which dramatises what they’re trying to say, and cuts through in a way that I don’t think either Kevin Rudd or Julia Gillard had, so clearly I think that kind of leadership would do well. I’m not sure however, that that’s the central question, because I suppose I was trying … I mean, I was trying to say and maybe I could just go to Barry’s final point – the weakness of the Carr deal, which I obviously would agree with you and I don’t think many people would disagree, I’m not sure how much stronger the Liberal Party is, but it wasn’t that much stronger in 2007 when Labor scored a very, very significant victory, and it had been out of power for a long time, so it didn’t really have the resources you speak about at that time. Insofar as I had anything to say, leadership weakness I think plays a role but I think more important than that was a series of unnecessary mistakes made about two big issues. The mining tax in a minor way, climate change in a big way. And I do think, and this is where it does link to leadership, it seems to me and maybe even Kevin Rudd would agree with this if he had his time again, if at the point when the Copenhagen Conference failed to produce much and when the Liberal Party fell to Abbott, I think then he should not have been risk averse, he should have been a leader with courage in a way that I think Hawke, but certainly Keating was, and would have decided, should have decided to have a double dissolution to fight on that issue, to say, this *is* what I’ve always said is the central issue of our time, if we lose on this, then Labor loses, but if we win, then the issue is kind of decided, because I don’t even think Tony Abbott could say, if Labor had won in a double dissolution election and had still kept the numbers in the Senate, and I know Antony has got a really interesting theory about that, but, if that had happened, then I think the issue would have been sort of decided. So I think, in my view, that’s where leadership really mattered. I think the risk averseness with both Rudd and Gillard has been a big problem, as well as many other things.

**Marilyn Lake**

Which Barry alluded to. Do you both quickly want to say something?

**Barry Jones**

Well, I was going to say, there is one other factor that has … it has nothing to do with politics, and that is, from Rudd’s point of view, the rains came at exactly the wrong time. You see, you’d had a period of long drawn-out drought and it wasn’t hard to convince people to say, the climate’s getting warmer, there’s going to be a long period of drought, we won’t break this, and then suddenly, you had cloudbursts everywhere, and that was really quite a significant factor in saying, maybe this dude’s got it wrong.

**Antony Green**

November 2010, everyone was saying, why is the Victorian government building a desalination plant? It’s so wet. Of course, if they hadn’t made that decision five years before and it hadn’t rained, then there would have been even worse problems.

**Marilyn Lake**

So there’s bad luck, climatic bad luck as well.

**Barry Jones**

Well, it just made it harder to explain. You can explain it, but it’s complex.

**Robert Manne**

I mean, I just about that, I don’t at all disagree with that, but in addition, it didn’t start raining in America in 2010, I mean, to put it metaphorically, and the push … if you look at all the … Canada, the United States and Australia, not Britain and not Europe … there was a movement in which the denialist movement began to score extremely heavily and most dramatically of all, has completely won over the Republican Party now, so … McCain once believed in climate change, now every plausible candidate for the Republican presidency has to pretend the scientists are left wing lunatics. And that means there has been a vast cultural victory won by those who are turning their back on the science. And that’s why I think Australia had its moment, and it could have – it had a chance in 2010 with a less risk averse leadership, of doing something. That for me is a very important failure.

**Marilyn Lake**

Let’s open it up for questions and comments while we’ve got time. Yes?

**Questioner**

First a question for Antony Green about our voting methods. Because we had more or less compulsory voting we must have a fairly large protest vote that’s floating there for some third party to take advantage of. I’d always voted Labor right up until Paul Keating …

**Robert Manne**

Could you take the microphone …

**Questioner**

Oh sorry. Because we more or less have compulsory voting we must have quite a large protest vote to be taken advantage of by a third party, whereas in countries where voting is voluntary, these people just don’t vote. I became a protest voter myself. I always voted Labor but once Paul Keating ratted on Bob Hawke, I became a Green voter, not because I believe in the Greens, but because I’m going to vote. And I always gave my preferences to the Labor Party. Now do we know where Green preferences go? Do they mostly go to the Labor Party? Do they … a large percentage go to the Liberals?

**Antony Green**

You’ve asked a couple of questions. The one about compulsory voting and the protest vote. Compulsory voting assists the major parties. There is a vast body of people who in other countries wouldn’t bother to vote. In Australia they vote, they have little connection with the electoral system, they have little knowledge of politics, apart from what they generally see on television in small packets, or the commercial news bulletins. Their knowledge of politics is quite superficial but they tend to have ties to a party. They tend to vote in the same way. They tend to turn out in the same way, and they vote for the parties they know, which is the ones that have been around for a long time. It’s the minor parties who are disadvantaged by compulsory voting and the decay of the major party vote in Australia is much lower than in countries with voluntary voting, because it’s the people who *want* to vote for a minor party who bother to turn out, rather than the ones who vote just out of habit which is what happens a lot in Australia. And as far as Greens preferences go, under compulsory preferential voting, we know where they go. Over 70% of them flow to Labor. And the higher the Green vote, beyond a certain level, every extra vote the Greens gain from Labor goes back to Labor as a preference. Where Labor is hurt, and it’s part of the explanation of the bad results in New South Wales and Queensland, is under optional preferential voting because for some reason, in both states, all the parties have gone into the same, just the one and the Greens in Queensland, 60% of their preferences just exhaust, they don’t go anywhere. And those are votes which Labor loses and they don’t come back as preferences. So what we know about Green preferences, if they *have* to give preferences, they go to Labor, if they don’t have to give preferences, they don’t give any.

**Marilyn Lake**

OK, another question.

**Questioner**

My question’s primarily for Barry, but of course it’s open to everyone. In the current federal system, the ALP is dominated by the right faction. And given that the ALP is in desperate need of, particularly structural form and I think a strong progressive vision to differentiate itself from the Liberal Party and to better tackle the challenge on the left, do you think that the ALP would be able to better itself by having the left faction dominant in federal leagues?

**Barry Jones**

I think …

**Antony Green**

You’re talking to someone who fought the left in Victoria for two decades.

**Barry Jones**

That really was the crazy left. If I were in caucus now, I’d certainly be in the kind of what I’d perhaps describe as the Faulkner left. The problem is that it’s very difficult to see a great deal of difference between say people who call themselves left – it’s really a kind of badging to some extent, and I’m not sure that it has much more or less significant ideologically than being a member of a particular football club does. I know it does for the football people. But it’s hard to explain. I mean, if you look at the divisions in the caucus, it’s not as if you can say, well, the left have got a clear ideological position and the right have got another ideological position. They’re all sort of mixed up. The thing that is really very odd, which hardly anyone ever comments on, but when they had these direct elections to the national presidency, ha ha, having been through that process, but how many times in these elections has the candidates of the right ever come first, and the answer is, never. They’ve never come first. And yet, every time there’s an national conference, who actually has the great … the majority, the largest numbers coming out of the national – well, the right of course. It’s because of these interlocking relationships. But when you get to people in the branches, to get out and actually … presumably the stackees don’t bother to vote.

**Antony Green**

I’d also add something to that. John Button wrote a very persuasive *Quarterly Essay* on factionalism, on the Labor Party, and one of the things he dealt with is factionalism. And he said, rather than the Labor Party being badly served by factions, in fact it’s the members of political unions, of unions, trade unions, who are badly served by factions, because the people who end up running those unions are leading their unions for factional reasons to do with power in the Labor Party. And you’re seeing that very clearly being played out in the HSU, a union which is there for factional reasons. And that’s … if you wanted to have an argument, and there was an argument on getting rid of the unions from the Labor Party so you could have a real social democratic party, and that it’s not dominated by these factions, but you could also equally argue that some of the trade unions, particularly the unions representing lower paid workers, would be better represented if their leadership were working on their issues rather than running around doing Labor Party factional issues.

**Marilyn Lake**

OK, we’ve got a lot of questions. Here first.

**Questioner**

The upcoming *Quarterly Essay* that David Marr’s writing will be focussing on Tony Abbott. And that seems to be the only thing that could maybe cause benefit to the Labor Party at the moment. Do you think it’s possible for lightning to strike twice?

**Robert Manne**

I shouldn’t answer … no, the answer is kind of no. I think that there is one thing looming about Tony Abbott which I won’t mention. With Tony Abbott, the paradox is that he’s pretty unpopular as a leader, but he has been a brilliant Opposition leader, in the sense that, under his … in the previous one, Malcolm Turnbull and Brendan Nelson were unable to make great headway – he’s made extraordinary headway, and apart from something quite unexpected happening, I don’t think Tony Abbott is at all vulnerable because he has … the last Newspoll, the Coalition has a 51% primary vote. The fact that he’s not personally popular, it seems to me, is neither here nor there. And I can’t see, whereas David Marr did score something by saying what everyone knew about Rudd being unpopular with his colleagues, I don’t think that David Marr can do a similar thing with Tony Abbott.

**Marilyn Lake**

OK, we have competition here. Claire.

**Questioner**

I’m not sure whether anybody else sees the elephant in this room, but I’m struck by the fact that Antony’s shown us that some of Labor’s so-called crisis is cyclical and Barry’s pointed to the success in the present government’s legislative agenda, and Robert has told us that we went from having Labor’s most popular leader to most unpopular leader within a matter of months. I’m just wondering if you think that a base level of sexism in the electorate is responsible for that, given that the only difference there is the gender of the leader.

**Marilyn Lake**

Antony, you wanted to …

**Antony Green**

I’ve got a strong view, having just been at the Queensland election. One of the reasons parties go for female candidates in marginal seats is there’s a perception that females are most honest.

**Questioner**

Can you say women, and not females?

**Antony Green**

OK, women. Women are more believable, more honest, more open as candidates and are more trustworthy. And I think what we’ve seen with Anna Bligh and Julia Gillard, is that when they are perceived as having crossed that line of actually being dishonest, to an extent, they get marked down massively, more than a male politician, who are believed to … well, they lie anyway is a perception. So I think that’s some of the sexism. I think there are other sexist issues but I don’t think … look, just going back to that last Tony Abbott question, Tony Abbott has systematically dismantled this government, with devastating rhetoric. When I see him on the television news, it is devastating and he just drills into the core of this government. That’s what’s undermined this government. And the question is, like I did the big graph with the big drop at the end there. What is climate change to the electorate? Is it an issue which is going to split Labor’s traditional working class base? There’s one issue that the Coalition doesn’t want to touch – it’s industrial relations, because at the moment they are diving into Labor’s base vote, its industrial, its working class, lower paid base, because they feel they’re going to pay more because of climate change, the carbon tax. That’s the issue they’ve really hammered in. Cost of living is just driving there. The one thing they don’t want to talk about is industrial relations, because then you open up the class divide and you might see that re-polarisation in the electorate. That’s how Paul Keating got back in 1993. He re-polarised the electorate in a way that it hadn’t been there for a decade. I’m not sure – that’s getting harder and harder to do with every passing year, but it is interesting – it’s not just sexism – there is that there but that’s not the cause of it.

**Robert Manne**

Claire, I really did think seriously about whether I’d discuss that … and I thought if I did it might overload the whole discussion. I actually agree with you that there is … if you look at Carmen Lawrence and Joan Kirner and Anna Bligh and Kristina Keneally and Julia Gillard, I think something’s at work. What I think is not that Australian ordinary voters won’t vote for women as leaders or even like them if they do well, I think what happens is that when a government falls into difficulty, then sexism cuts in. And its sorts of a lot of people either subliminally or consciously think, that’s what we really expected. And so I think a real study of the role of women as leaders in recent Australian politics would be highly interesting and it would lead, in my view, it would lead to something like that conclusion – that when difficulties … partly to do with trust, but even to do just generally with difficulties, somehow a sexism does re-emerge within the electorate I think. But to make that case would require quite a lot of empirical work which I don’t know whether it’s been done or not.

**Marilyn Lake**

OK. Yes.

**Questioner**

You mentioned Carmen Lawrence and of course she had problems with the Lawrence of amnesia issue, which was not necessarily sexist I suppose. You also refer to the nasty Republicans who are massive climate deniers. Of course James Lovelock seems to have changed his tune a little bit recently as well. Is he a nasty Republican climate denier?

**Robert Manne**

No, he’s a 92 year old contrarian.

**Questioner**

OK, but he’s changed his tune. Now, the important issue for me has been the liar issue. And the carbon tax was only one aspect of it, but of course we had a cavalcade of Labor politicians saying, there’s no move against Rudd, you guys are all kidding us, this is ridiculous, the ABC is a joke. And of course the faceless men stuck the knives in, and then in the lead-up to the most recent challenge, all of the people were saying, he’s a great guy, he’s a fantastic guy, he’s the best Foreign Minister we’ve ever had, until the challenge came and then they were all sticking the knives in. They were lying their teeth out.

**Marilyn Lake**

So this is your major point?

**Questioner**

The question is, how can we trust any of these senior people who have lied time after time after time?

**Marilyn Lake**

Thanks.

**Robert Manne**

Well, there are so many different points, some of which I agree with, some I’m not so sure about. I mean, I felt the same about John Howard over Tampa and children overboard and he very cleverly said in the 2004 election when it was beginning to be revealed, you can trust me, and what he meant was, you can trust me with the economy, even though I told fibs about children overboard etc. These are complicated matters. Trust is very important and it plays a role in politics all the time and then one can get into partisan arguments about who’s worse.

**Antony Green**

I think as a general rule, one of the difficulties the Gillard government has had is that … we can sit here and we know why people change their mind, why they say one thing one day and then they change it the next. I mean, we’re all professionals, we understand why that happens. We also understand how the Constitution works, how governments are formed, we know all those rules. Your average voter out there knows they go out and they vote and their perception is they’re voting for a Prime Minister. They also understand that if you vote for a government, you vote for a party and they get into government, they do what they say they were going to do. And the two things that have hamstrung this government, is they don’t really understand how Julia Gillard became Prime Minister. The one Prime Minister they did elect got tossed out of office and they couldn’t explain why they did it. And then there was a minority government and it’s a different perception down here to in New South Wales and Queensland, but how did we end up with this minority government? And once they were in government, they didn’t do what they said they were going to do. They changed their mind. There’s a whole bunch of levels there with what the government has done and how it got into office aren’t the expectations of what they expect government to be. They don’t expect politics to work like that and it is working like that. And I think they’re all things which have undermined the current government. It’s not what your average voter who doesn’t really understand the system deeply – they have a perception of it and it’s not being met.

**Marilyn Lake**

It is interesting though if I could just say something – to go back to Claire’s point. And Antony, you made the same point, that sexism seems to cut in deeper when it’s a woman not being as virtuous as she should be. They fall from the pedestal much further I think. Because I think with Howard, when he was challenged with core promises and non-core promises, that was his rhetoric for dealing with that, it didn’t seem to have the same overlay of sort … you know, that that made Howard deeply vicious, in a way. The language of the bitch that’s been used against Gillard, I think, has cut more deeply, don’t you think?

**Antony Green**

Yes …

**Robert Manne**

Although it was a bigger issue, the carbon tax. I mean to say clearly before the election, we won’t introduce it and to then set up a committee which does introduce it, or gets ready to introduce it, is a big issue. And in fairness to Howard, and I’m not often accused of that, when he was intending to introduce the GST, he did first go to the election and I do think that the government on the issue of climate change has really stuffed things up and I think that it shouldn’t be discounted as what’s happened.

**Marilyn Lake**

OK.

**Questioner**

On Sunday morning, on *The Insiders* last Sunday, David Marr coined a new term to describe Julia Gillard. And he talked about politicians who seemed to get away with lots of things, make mistakes and then continue on and nothing drastic happens, and we call those people Teflon-coated, and he was suggested that Julia perhaps is Velcro, because everything sticks. And we’ve touched a little bit, I think, on maybe an explanation for that, in the sexism question. I’m just wondering if people agree with that, and why? So apart from the gender issue, are there other reasons why things stick to Julia?

**Antony Green**

I’ve got a reason. Some of it’s not actually about here. Some of it’s about minority government. I saw the same thing with the second term of the Greiner and Fahey government. If you’re a majority government and you go into minority, you’re on the decline. You’re not sort of being held … you’re sort of coming to an end. And you suddenly lose your real ability to control every issue. If the government had had a five seat majority, Craig Thompson would have been dismissed from parliament. There are a number of those issues would just would have been resolved. And they can’t be resolved in a hung parliament where the government can’t afford to lose the seat. So some of the Velcro stuff is just simply because they’re in minority. And I remember John Fahey who had a string of ministers and members in marginal seats who had exactly the same sort of problems coming up, one after the other. So some of that is to do with minority government and a government which was in majority would have been able to control the political agenda of the day better. This government’s not very good at controlling the agenda anyway, but in minority it’s even less able to do that.

**Marilyn Lake**

OK, now we’ve only got a couple of minutes. Robert, should we finish now?

**Robert Manne**

Well, maybe one more question then I’d like to say one thing about the next event.

**Marilyn Lake**

Yes, someone’s been waiting over here. If you could be quick.

**Questioner**

In relation to the structural issues particularly that Barry was talking about before, in my own experience, being a paid-up financial and active member of the Australian Labor Party, in my recent experience I’ve had probably ten to fifteen colleagues my age, early twenties, who have now, due to ideological disengagement with the party, have defected to the Greens. Is there any hope, or can you see any ideological strategy or policy initiatives that can perhaps help re-engage the more ideological or the younger members of the party or even the non-aligned members of the youth of today.

**Marilyn Lake**

Maybe Barry, you could take that one.

**Barry Jones**

Well, the short answer is no. But I’ll just expand it slightly. One of the problems is I think that is a very process-driven government. They’re very interested in process. They’re very interested in getting the ticks about the legislation that goes through, but in fact it’s not a government that’s good at explaining an ideological position or a position out of conviction, so that the result is that to some extent you’ve got … you’ve certainly got ministers who are capable, who are competent and so on, but if you really push them and said, what are your core beliefs? I mean, it’s curious, when you look back on the grand old days, you could imagine there were ministers in the Hawke government who’d actually gone to jail for their beliefs. You’d be struggling to think of any member of the present government – it’s very difficult to imagine somebody who said, look, I believe so passionately about this belief that I’m prepared to … I’d go to jail if necessary to do it. Because in a way, I never heard anyone say, I really admire Mark Arbib. I really admire what he stands for, because nobody knew what he stood for. They knew he was a capable person, capable apparatchik, but what his beliefs were, I had no idea. Nobody had any idea. And that’s part of the difficulty, that there is a vision vacuum, an ideological vacuum.

**Antony Green**

I want to add one remark to that, and this is in relation to New Zealand. Helen Clark was probably one of the most ideologically left leaders in the Western world in the last couple of decades. She had a passionate hatred of the Greens, for one reason. She’d taken over the Labour Party when it was on its knees and built it up to the point where it could get into government. She hadn’t sold out on principle, she’d had to compromise but she built a base to get into government. What she hated about the Greens was that they’d ambushed her in one of the elections, in 2002, when she was on track to get a majority and they ambushed her over an issue which was about getting the Greens from 5 to 8% of the vote. In other words, it’s all right to be ideologically poor and stand on one issue, when you’ve got a party which is only 10% of the electorate and can resolve a position which they all agree on. If you’re trying to get to 40%, you’re trying to compromise. If you’re talking about an issue like gay marriage, which the Greens all agree on, if you’d try that in the Labor Party, there are groups like the shoppies, who are fundamentally opposed to that issue but they are with the rest of the Labor Party on industrial issues. How do you bridge that divide? Get Up is a good example of the same sort of thing. People can join it because they’ve got an interest in one issue, but if you’ve got an interest in broader issues, and you have to realise you’ve got to compromise and aggregate your opinions to get into government, then politics is different and I think one of the things that people are getting interested in is one issue and that’s why the traditional major parties aren’t of interest, because they’re a broad issue, they’re broad issues and they’re not single issues, and people find it very hard to stay involved in a party which doesn’t want to spend its time only on their issue. And that’s why they join Get Up.

**Marilyn Lake**

Before we go on to Robert, if you’d all just join me in thanking the speakers for such a wonderful discussion.

[applause]

I think we’ve had wonderful wisdom and insight, but Robert, you now want to say …

**Robert Manne**

I would like to thank Marilyn, who’s been a great supporter of Ideas and Society and I also thank very much both Antony and Barry for I think, really, really interesting speeches.

If I could say, Ideas and Society will continue so long as we get support, so I encourage you to keep coming. The next event is on May 25th – it’s on I think a very interesting and important topic which is the question of equality in education in the Gonski Report and the two speakers will be Professor Richard Teese, who is University of Melbourne and Carmen Lawrence, who was mentioned, who was one of the people who worked on the Gonski Report and wrote it. She’s coming across from Perth, so if you could keep Friday, May 25th in mind and publicise the event I would be gratified.

**Marilyn Lake**

Thank you. Thank you for coming.