

Comment from Michael C H Jones

Australia is presently trying to settle down with a new Minority Party Government led by its first female Prime Minister Julia Gillard. She has the confidence of the House of Representatives by a majority of 76/74 - but 4 of her supporters are not Labor Party parliamentarians. There is no certainty she will last the three year term.

It is almost certain however that her lack of international experience and the tensions in her Party from the "sacking" of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who is now Foreign Minister, will mean either indecisiveness in policy or mistakes of some consequence. The range of global meetings that she is currently attending representing Australia are not venues for "new chum" domestically oriented politicians. It is debatable whether her senior ministers can guide her and indeed that she will take counsel. Wayne Swan, the Treasurer, rightly or wrongly has a reputation as being particularly weak in this area of giving advice as was shown in his relationship with Kevin Rudd.

On the other hand the Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott and his Shadow Ministry are even more "light weight" on foreign policy and global economic relations experience. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition, though considerably under-rated, has the onerous task of shadowing Foreign Affairs, Rudd, and Trade, Emerson - no easy task as these two ministers represent the sharp end of the government's intellectual capacities. Perhaps former leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull, could be quickly promoted to Shadow Minister for Trade.

There is talent in the ranks on both sides, yet it is doubtful given the present circumstances that they can influence seriously policy formulation. Many government members are sensitive about the drive for power of Bill Shorten, now a junior minister, and the voting power at ALP conferences of trade unions such as the AWU whose spokesmen were extraordinarily high profile in bringing down former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. A national committee of inquiry for reform, comprising two former State Premiers from NSW and VIC and a former Federal Minister for Defence, has been established to try to stop the accelerating haemorrhage of party members.

On the Liberal/National Coalition side there are also problems. In the Liberal Party there are deep seated antagonisms between traditional progressives inspired by the founding years of the Menzies' 1940s and more recent John Howard Conservatives with growing religious fundamentalist attitudes and connections with like-minded groups in the USA. Similarly in the National Party there are regular defections by members who sit as Independents in the Federal Parliament. Indeed it was two such Independents from the National Party that put the ALP back into Government.

As we say in Australia "it is a can of worms" wherein the Government exits because that is the only way the two Independents could guarantee the "pork barrel" for their country/rural electorates. In this respect Australia is no different to other parliamentary systems.

The Ministry and Shadow Ministry email contacts below provide a straight road to Australian Constitutional Democracy

A) Australian Ministers for International Institutions

1) Julia Gillard - Prime Minister: http://www.pm.gov.au/media_centre

2) Wayne Swan - Deputy PM and Treasurer:
<http://www.treasurer.gov.au/DisplayDocs.aspx?doc=contact.htm&PageID=008&min=wms>

3) Kevin Rudd - Minister for Foreign Affairs: <http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>

4) Craig Emerson - Minister for Trade: <http://www.trademinister.gov.au/>

5) Stephen Smith - Minister for Defence: <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/smith/index.cfm>

6) Simon Crean - Minister for the Arts, Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/members/member.asp?id=DT4>

B) Australian Cabinet Ministers: http://www.pm.gov.au/The_Ministry/Cabinet

C) Shadow Ministry: <http://www.aph.gov.au/Library/parl/43/Shadow/index.htm>