



# A Captain Chaos who ruled by fear

Media manipulation and smart-alec politics were par for the course in the Rudd administration, **BARRIE CASSIDY** writes

**I**n *The Party Thieves: The Real story of the 2010 Election*, journalist and author Barrie Cassidy follows the trajectory of Kevin Rudd, from the heady days of Kevin O'Leary to the bitter reality of Kevin O'Lemon. In summing up Rudd's rise and fall, Cassidy recounts how, in July this year, just after the leadership change, he was leaving Old Parliament House after a wake for journalist Peter Bowers. Barry Cohen, a senior minister in the Hawke government, said to him: "If Rudd had stayed the leader, I would have voted for the Liberals for the first time in my life".

Then Cohen added: "If Rudd was a better bloke, he would still be the leader. But he pissed everybody off."

Cassidy says he wrote down Cohen's words, convinced that few people could nail such a complex issue so succinctly. Here is an extract from his book:

**H**AD RUDD not ruled in part by fear, somebody along the way might have warned him of the consequences of his actions.

In June 2008, John Lyons wrote an extensive feature on Rudd's office for *The Australian*, headlined, "Captain Chaos and the workings of the inner circle". He told of how two of the nation's most senior officials, the Defence Force Chief, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, and the head of the

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Michael L'Estrange, once waited in a corridor for four hours to see the prime minister. Rudd had urgently summoned them, only to let them slip down the list of priorities as the day dragged on.

The notion that two of the country's most senior public servants had nothing better to do than wander aimlessly, occasionally going for coffee or making calls on their mobiles, had apparently escaped the prime minister and his office staff.

Lyons' analysis was reinforced by a report on the night that ABC News 24 first went to air, in July 2010. Chris Uhlmann gave a damning account of how Rudd treated the National Security Committee of Cabinet with disdain. The committee is, in some senses, the most important in government, dealing with everything from terrorism to wars. It is made up of security officials and the heads of the military, as well as the prime minister and six key cabinet ministers. The prime minister sets the agenda and the timetable, so you would think he would call the committee at a time most convenient to him. Yet, remarkably, he often turned up hours late, and on some occasions didn't turn up at all, sending his 31-year-old chief of staff to stand in for him – not as an observer, but as a proxy, a participant.

Uhlmann reported that unnamed senior officials were appalled at the practice, and within 24

hours, plenty of former officials were prepared to go public and express their disgust.

A month or so earlier, former Liberal staffer Niki Savva, in a feature article in *The Australian*, had outlined such an experience that she had heard about. She wrote that NSC members once waited three hours for Rudd, until the new head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Dennis Richardson, "decided he couldn't wait any longer and stalked off. Oh, and Richardson also used the f-word to express his displeasure".

Lyons, in his article, had also recounted how, on the morning of June 4, 2008, Rudd had been watching Senate estimates hearings when he became enraged with what he saw on the monitor. He was being accused of breaking an election promise to give computers to every secondary school child. Rudd, forever the micromanager, cancelled meetings, summoned staff and demanded to see everything that he had ever said on the subject – even the deputy prime minister, Julia Gillard, was brought in on the discussions.

Such media management is usually routine for political staff.

The "boss", be he the prime minister or a junior minister, raises their concern, but the follow-up is handled for them.

The most alarming development, though, was the media manipulation attempted by the government, which saw smart-



alec politics entrenched for years. The Rudd administration tried to manage the 24-hour news cycle. So much useless information was gathered and disseminated because nobody in a leadership role in Rudd's office had any real experience in the media. Interviews were arranged for the sake of it, with exposure seemingly the criteria.

To that end, press assistants would arrive at work at 4.30am and prepare breakdowns of news coverage for the more experienced ministerial press secretaries, who arrived for a telephone hook-up at 6am. The press secretaries would then determine what the government should be saying that day, either to counter the news coverage or get back on the front foot. They would also decide who should say it. So staffers (minders) – some of them, most notably Rudd's own press secretary, Lachlan Harris, lacking any previous experience in the media – would then tell the ministers which of them would appear in the media that day, and what the message had to be. The whole process was then repeated at 6pm.

Often, it was plain comical. One morning, finance minister Lindsay Tanner was dragged from caucus and told he would be holding a doorstep interview in a courtyard.

He was given five dot points on a piece of paper and told that was the message he had to deliver. He did so. But journalists being journalists, they salivated at the prospect of having the finance minister suddenly available to them and tackled him on every tricky issue that had arisen the previous day and overnight. Harris watched the early reporting and was furious that the five dot points had not been reported. He summoned Tanner's press secretary to his office – they did that a lot – and gave her a real dressing-down.

It was naive in the extreme to think that the media was that easy to manipulate. But still they tried.

In June 2010, when a Fairfax poll had the Coalition in front 53 per cent to 47 per cent, the junior woodchucks sent out a message to every minister who was to front the media that day. They all had to spout one line. And the line was that, if the polls were right, then Tony Abbott would be prime minister. Apparently, the country was to freeze in fright. As Peter van Onselen wrote in *The Australian*: "They think their best asset is who they are not. Inspiring stuff." The ABC's Mark Simkin bundled all the "grabs" together and it made them look ridiculous.

But by then, no humiliation was beyond the ministers who had long before abandoned any sense of

self-respect or individual authority. They simply wanted to please the prime minister's office, and that is what drove them.

On another occasion, Harris had phoned the agriculture minister, Tony Burke, in Darwin and told him that he was the assigned minister for the day, insisting he meet five radio commitments. Burke was bedridden in a hotel room with laryngitis and could barely speak.

In whispered tones, he tried to explain his predicament: "Even if I felt well, I can't do it. I'm losing my voice." Harris responded by shouting abuse, accusing him of not pulling his weight. What's worse, an email was then circulated making the same point.

It was inconceivable before the Rudd prime ministership that any press secretary could treat a minister in that way. But authority had shifted away from elected officials to staffers given obscene powers by the leader himself.

■ This is an edited extract from *The Party Thieves: The Real Story of the 2010 Election* by Barrie Cassidy, Melbourne University Press, \$34.99.

■ Barrie Cassidy will speak at the National Press Club tomorrow at 7pm, with panellists Malcolm Farr and Chris Uhlmann, and Heather Ewart in the role of chairwoman. Visit [www.npc.org.au/upcomingspeakers.html](http://www.npc.org.au/upcomingspeakers.html)



Nexus of power: former prime minister Kevin Rudd and his press secretary, Lachlan Harris.