

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG. RUDD MUST WEAR THE BLAME

*Just as it did with
Howard, the buck
stops with the PM*

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IF four people had died either directly or indirectly as a result of a Howard government policy, the lynch mob would have been out not for the minister responsible for the program, but for the prime minister himself.

In the Howard years, if Indian students were being regularly assaulted and sometimes murdered, it would not be a premier forced to make grovelling apologies on an almost daily basis and trying to repair relations with an old friend, it would be the PM. And whether it was true or not, the PM would be blamed for fostering latent racism. If John Howard had been prime minister when the Sri Lankan refugees were holed up for weeks on the customs vessel, Oceanic Viking, churches and humanitarian groups would have launched an all-out war against him.

On all these issues, Kevin Rudd managed to remain separate and inviolate. Like one of those virgins Tony Abbott was talking about.

Every time Howard appeared anywhere, he would be held personally responsible for every sneeze, wheeze or catastrophe that befell Australians.

Howard's personality and approach frequently invited it, but more often than not his friends in the media and lobby groups made sure he never escaped an interview without having to answer for or shoulder the blame for whatever had gone wrong.

Peter Garrett is now being held wholly and solely responsible for the mismanagement of the insulation installation program. He is a soft target, already damaged by compromised principles and failed promise and will pay a price

for his apparent neglect.

But there was a collective decision-making process here, which is being largely ignored. The architects and progenitors of the \$42 billion stimulus package that spawned the insulation program were the Prime Minister and Treasurer. Who insisted that it be rolled out in such haste, and before there was certainty it could be properly, safely administered?

No one is demanding Rudd plead guilty to the deaths, but yesterday in a tepid half-hour television interview he did not pause for even a second to offer sympathy to the families of the four young men or express a scintilla of regret at the tragedy. The teleprompter in his chest that passes for a ticker was beating to its relentless rhythm when he began by rounding on Abbott for attacking Garrett, then pointing out that each year in Australia there are 138,000 industrial accidents involving serious injury, and more than 300 deaths to be investigated. And, by the way, we should wait for the coronial inquiries to finish before pointing fingers.

There. That's exactly what was needed. A flurry of facts and figures and details of the relevant regulatory standards. I bet that comforted the families and convinced viewers Rudd was across it.

Across it, not accountable for it. Not for that bit, the bad bit. Only the good bit, that part where we dodged the recession. And he was quick to trumpet that again yesterday. That was no small thing. But guess what? Neither are the deaths of four young men.

Rudd became opposition

leader in late 2006. It's a long time for a politician to be impervious.

Slowly, it is changing.

There are several reasons why. Some of the journos have stopped behaving like Pussycat Dolls. That's partly because Abbott has made the opposition competitive; it is safer for the less brave among them to tuck in behind him.

Secondly, they were shown just what Rudd is capable of — or not — by a group of teens on Q&A.

Thirdly, the Rudd style, and I use the word loosely, is beginning to bore them silly. RoboRudd (along with RoboWong and all the other programmed ministers) was amusing to begin with. Everybody had fun with his acronyms and bureaucratise, but there's only so much of that kind of language you can take.

Plus, the worse the Liberals got, the better Rudd appeared. He looked credible when Howard no longer did. Next to Brendan Nelson, well, even Rudd looked sincere. And towards the end against Malcolm Turnbull, all he thought he had to do was turn up.

Now, the contrast between Rudd and Abbott is too stark. Abbott offers machismo and Rudd pure Mogadon.

So far it is working in Abbott's favour, despite the Opposition Leader's mistakes and flaws.

Like it or not, Rudd will have to accept that whenever something goes wrong, there's only one person ultimately responsible. Him.

Niki Savva's book So Greek — Confessions of a Conservative Leftie, is published by Scribe.