HD	**From Whitlam to Abbott, Australian Prime Ministers' first year in power**
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In opposition, Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott were fond of comparing their battles to become the nation's leader to climbing Everest.

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The analogy was designed to convey the difficulty and uncertainty of the political ascent. When a leader was doing well, it was a caution against cockiness.

It can be equally applied to the situation of a prime minister, who will ultimately be judged on how well he or she uses their time at the summit and whether they make the inevitable descent as long and productive as possible.

It's a matter of coming with the right stores and equipment, coping with the rarefied air, avoiding avalanches and snow drifts, and negotiating the often steep and treacherous terrain.

In this lecture I'll look at the arrival at the peak of our last eight summiteers – Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott.

First steps

A prime minister's first year lays the groundwork for what's to come. It tells us much about the leader's style and substance. But it is not necessarily a predictor of how their story will pan out. It's possible to consolidate after a bad beginning; equally, a good start can fade into unfulfilled promise, or explode into spectacular disaster, with what looks like impressive **energy** turning out to be dangerous hyperactivity.

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Prime Minister Kevin Rudd at work in the PM's office. AAP/Stefan Postles

A number of factors will set the tone for this year. Central will be the personality, vision, competence, drive, work pattern and judgement of the leader.

Also vital will be the preparation for government, what had been promised in opposition, the quality and cohesion of the team, and the external situation in which the administration finds itself. If this latter changes, the issue becomes whether the PM adapts or is overwhelmed – or indeed, tries to turn a blind eye.

The chance factors that arise may be crises, disasters or opportunities. A crisis or disaster can become an opportunity. The Port Arthur massacre was Howard's chance to prosecute gun reform, which became a lasting legacy. MH17's downing showed Abbott as an assertive leader in an international context. The global financial crisis that confronted Rudd was a challenge of a very different sort.

Some governments and their leaders will mark turning points in the nation's history.

Whitlam took power when indeed the times were a-changin'. Australia was rethinking itself, with new issues emerging or old ones taking a fresh turn. It was the same, in a different way, with Hawke, who assumed office when opening the Australian economy was becoming imperative. Gillard's ascent was a milestone rather than a turning point: Australia's first female prime minister.

Each PM arrives in distinct circumstances, national or personal or both.

Whitlam brought Labor to power after 23 years, its previous experience of government virtually a generation away. The Labor team combined enthusiasm, impatience, innocence and inexperience.

Hawke was PM within weeks of becoming Labor leader; he had none of the slog of heading an opposition.

Keating took over the job when he was half worn-out from years as treasurer, with the government staring at the spectre of defeat.

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Fraser arrived in the most unusual and dramatic manner, installed as caretaker PM by governor-general John Kerr after he sacked Whitlam. This was a path that, despite his immediately winning a thumping election victory, cast doubts over Fraser's legitimacy in the minds of some.

Gillard, having staged a successful coup against her prime minister, was burdened with a legitimacy legacy of another sort.

Some prime ministers learn from the experiences or failures of those who went before; they observe what worked and what didn't. (Needless to say, some ignore, forget or choose to defy the history.)

The Hawke government was determined to distance itself from the Whitlam one, which despite its

achievements had been dogged by poor management and ill-discipline.

As Abbott approached the prime ministership, he'd have been aware Liberal "dries" feared he might follow what they saw as a cautious, do-little Fraser model.

A new PM must deal with a legacy from the last one. This can be a political bonus (Hawke could usefully contrast his approach with the divisiveness of the Fraser years) or a distracting negative (Gillard inherited problems with carbon pricing, **mining** tax and asylum seeker policy from Rudd).

Energy in the first year can be absorbed by undoing things (as we've seen with Abbott's undoing of the carbon and **mining** taxes).

Feeding the beast

In the more than four decades since Whitlam's election, there have been major changes in the external and internal environments in which PMs operate. Let me touch on just two: the transformation of the media landscape, and the growth of the Prime Minister's Office.

In the early 1970s television was reshaping the political playground, but the process was in its early stages. The media cycle was speeding to a quick march; today it is a continuous sprint.

Whitlam's undertaking to have a weekly news conference seemed a significant promise. Now hardly a day goes by that the PM is not out and about, doing one or more electronic interviews or fronting reporters, mostly at stand-up, so-called "doorstops".

The relentless 24-hour news cycle has had many direct and indirect implications for prime ministers. It is not only that the demands are multiplied. The attention spans of both media and audiences are shortened.

A prime minister's desire to keep the media beast fed can rush decision-making. Obviously certain decisions are urgent, but a lot of freneticism is discretionary; more time could be taken, leading to more considered action.

Over-exposure to politics, via an intensified media coverage, has contributed to community cynicism and accentuated a culture of complaint, which has made reform harder to sell.

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Paul Kelly argues in his new book Triumph and Demise that "it is by no means certain that Bob Hawke and Paul Keating would have succeeded in the contemporary system". This has set off a debate about whether good leadership can prevail over the new circumstances. Whatever one's view on that, I think we can agree that today's environment makes the reform task tougher.

The rise of social media is part of the acceleration, and also interconnects the political process as never before. It has another dimension for prime ministers; the internet can become a cesspool of hate, as Gillard found. Abbott has described it as “kind of like electronic graffiti”.

The burgeoning of the Prime Ministerial Office – known around parliament simply as the “PMO” – is both a source of strength and a potential vulnerability. A strong and numerous staff, especially if combined with a powerful Prime Minister’s department, gives a leader greater ability to personally drive policy and to oversee the work of ministers.

But it can also isolate the PM, limit the impact of incoming advice; if it is used as an instrument of excessive domination, colleagues will resent it. Today the PMO exercises extensive and detailed control over ministers, including in relation to the staffing of their offices and what media the ministers and even ordinary government MPs do.

The growth in ministerial and prime ministerial staff started in earnest under Whitlam. In a position paper prepared for him, Peter Wilenski (a Whitlam adviser in government) described the PMO as:

a service organisation ensuring that no function performed by the Prime Minister is overlooked, and that each type of demand is attended to on an ongoing basis in accordance with the instructions laid down by the Prime Minister.

When he was simultaneously PM and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Whitlam had a staff of 21; now, Abbott has an office of more than 50.

Recipes for success or failure

In their first year, prime ministers face the huge challenge of getting themselves and their team on top of the job of governing. Bad habits set early can **lead** to deep problems later.

To manage a government well, prime ministers must be able first and foremost to manage themselves. In a speech last year excoriating Rudd, former Labor minister Nicola Roxon offered some “housekeeping tips for members of a future Labor government”, many of which are useful rules for a PM of either hue.

Roxon’s advice included: keep your focus high-level on the things that really matter; be a good delegator; be polite and persuasive; run a good diary; choose good people; and accept you are not always right and can’t fix everything.

We can examine the first year of prime ministers against various criteria.

Did they come with a policy blueprint?

Did they arrive with substantial political capital, in terms of legitimacy, popularity and seats?

Were they personally organised and disciplined and have a good office?

How experienced was the team and did it hold together?

Was the government hit with unexpected developments and how did the PM handle them?

How successfully did they get out the message – did they run, in today's jargon, a convincing narrative?

What were the assessments, within the beltway and by the public, at the end of their first year and how did they measure up to what happened later?

A year in, were they learning and growing?

1972: Gough Whitlam

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Gough Whitlam certainly arrived as a man with a plan, one that had been extensively presented to the nation over two elections.

"The Program" focused on the life needs of the Australian families, particularly those in the growing sprawling suburbs, with promises of better schools, free university education, a new health scheme and improved cities.

For Whitlam, "the Program" was a political bible to be implemented at all costs and with all speed. He was the one PM in our list to have what amounted to an obsession with keeping promises, which later became a fault rather than a virtue when economic circumstances changed.

The desire to get going fast led to the extraordinary two-man ministry, which issued 40 decisions in a fortnight.

Whitlam had a modest majority of nine seats and didn't control the Senate. The team was inexperienced: no one had been a minister before. Whitlam initially also took on the post of foreign affairs. No subsequent PM has held a major portfolio.

Whitlam insisted no previous administration had come better prepared for its tasks. Yet an enduring criticism of his government was that it couldn't handle the job. That disconnect invites the question: what is the most vital tool in the kit bag? Detailed policy? An administrative blueprint? Flexibility?

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In the Labor tradition, Whitlam had a ministry chosen by the caucus; he allocated portfolios. He had the problem of the entire ministry being in cabinet – something that no subsequent Labor PM would tolerate – and caucus had the final say on decisions. Ministers who had lost out in cabinet could refight the case in caucus.

Hawke, the next Labor PM, would ensure he had both a cabinet and outer ministry, and that cabinet solidarity prevailed in the party room.

From early on, the Whitlam government faced formidable resistance. Labor's conservative opponents had power centres in the Senate and the states, and the link would become increasingly potent later. The Senate – more difficult than the one Abbott faces – by the end of 1973 had rejected 13 bills, deferred 10 and amended two.

From the get-go, Whitlam had trouble running his team. This was partly because of Labor's structural arrangements at that time, but also because of his own style.

Biographer Jenny Hocking notes "his inability to control meetings and to manage difficult, determined, personalities".

Nor was Whitlam interested enough, or strong enough, in managing the economy, a problem exacerbated by having a weak treasurer. The government faced worsening inflation (around 10% in September 1973 and rising). The spending programs would be unsustainable. Plans for cuts were unpopular.

A 25% tariff cut brought a backlash. A referendum for Commonwealth control over prices and incomes, held just after the one year anniversary (and opposed by Hawke, who was president of both the ACTU and ALP), would be lost. In October 1973 came the **oil** shock that would later rock the economy.

At his first anniversary Whitlam boasted 244 bills had been introduced and 90 commissions, committees and task forces had been at work, and reeled off many reform achievements.

Whitlam's first year was marked by a flurry of activity, including many big and some visionary decisions, driven by a PM with a fixed agenda and inadequate management skills. At the anniversary the economic outlook was threatening and the polls were suggesting he would lose an election held then.

1975: Malcolm Fraser

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His successor Malcolm Fraser started with a double advantage. After his brief period as caretaker, he won the 1975 election by a huge majority. And he had control of the Senate, the only one of our eight to begin that way.

And yet he approached government quite cautiously.

In his "Turn on the Lights" campaign Fraser promised economies in spending. "Getting rid of extravagance will make its own contribution to reducing the deficit," he said. Some Liberals regarded Fraser's start as a missed opportunity, especially to cut harder into spending (although this was often in retrospect – much of the public debate of the time was about cuts).

The political atmospherics were still affected by the hangover of the dismissal. Apart from that Fraser, despite his pre-election rhetoric, was not a small

government ideologue, but rather a traditional conservative, believing in a significant role for government.

Fraser himself had regrets about not using his early opportunity to do more to tackle spending. He told biographer Philip Ayres: “In retrospect, we should have established an expenditure base that was totally sustainable over a long period ahead,” and he noted that he’d later told Margaret Thatcher to “get in with a broad axe very quickly”.

He put some blame on Treasury and his cabinet. Treasury secretary Fred Wheeler had advised not to go further; as for the cabinet: “I’d proposed that unemployment benefits for 16- and 17-year-olds should be cut off … I couldn’t get my own cabinet to wear it”.

Of these prime ministers, Fraser was the first who arrived with an agenda for and a need to cut spending. The memoir he and journalist Margaret Simons co-authored says:

The idea of limited resources and a limited government role became commonplace over the next 30 years … In Fraser’s time it was a new theme. Placing economic management at the centre of politics was an important part of Fraser’s legacy.

Fraser did use this 12 months to bring in some bold reforms: a new family allowance paid to mothers; income tax indexation; indexing of pensions; and legislation for Aboriginal land rights.

The family allowance was a major **equity** move, helping lower income families and women. Tax indexation was an example of over-reach, which could not be sustained. The land rights legislation was an important continuity with the Whitlam government.

Ayres concluded that: “Generally, 1976 revealed Fraser’s government to be far more reform-minded than those on the left would ever have predicted in December 1975”.

By the anniversary, the most noted feature was the dominance of Fraser himself who, backed by an enhanced department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, had his hands on everything.

Mike Steketee from the Sydney Morning Herald observed, “After a year in office, few areas of government administration and policy have been left untouched by [his] personal imprint”.

The Fraser government would go on to win two more terms, but left a mixed legacy. Paul Kelly concluded: “Fraser’s dominance of his own time is not matched by his imprint upon history”.

1983: Bob Hawke

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Bob Hawke pitched for office pledged to a more inclusive style than the Fraser government. With his

slogan of “reconciliation, recovery, reconstruction”, he declared “the first pledge I now make, a commitment which embraces every other undertaking, is that everything we do as a government will have the one great goal – to reunite this great community of ours”.

Neal Blewett, a Hawke minister, later wrote that “Hawke as Prime Minister was corporatist and bureaucratic by instinct and presidential in style”.

Unlike Whitlam and Keating, Hawke did not see parliament as his natural forum. His speech writer Stephen Mills said that Hawke regarded parliament “with the kind of disdain that the self-made businessman has for an MBA course at a university”.

Hawke understood the need for order and process in government; he was a skilled chairman of his cabinet; ministers, Blewett records, “were generally on a light rein”.

Most significantly, Hawke was elected on one platform and implemented another. Anticipating that he would find a different economic situation from the one that formed the basis of the campaign, Hawke in the final days before the election gave himself an “out” on promises if circumstances required.

The day after his victory Treasury secretary John Stone presented him with a $9.6 **billion** projected deficit. As Blanche d'Alpuget later wrote:

While painful for Hawke’s election promises, the deficit was electoral **gold**. Hawke had a huge economic headache but also a huge stick with which to beat the Opposition, and a huge lever for reform.

Hawke used consensus as a political tool. The accord forged with the unions before the election provided a powerful mechanism for achieving the government’s economic and social objectives, delivering wage restraint in exchange for improvements in the social wage. Hawke’s bringing together of unions, **business** and others in the April 1983 economic summit showcased his approach. He was backed by a personal office that was strong on both the policy and political sides.

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Before the end of the first year, the government had taken one of its most momentous economic decisions – the float of the dollar. That laid the path for later reform.

Just short of the government’s first anniversary Medicare had been established, after the Fraser government had largely dismantled its predecessor Medibank.

Nevertheless, soon after the anniversary questions were being asked about how reformist the government would be. Later years would provide the answer: very.

Hawke had also shown he could manage a political crisis. He was hit by a scandal involving a Russian spy and a former ALP national secretary; he lost a senior

minister in the course of it, and had to appear before a royal commission. But the damage was contained.

More electorally serious was the move to tighten pension eligibility, which would come to haunt his next election campaign.

Marking the anniversary, journalist Ken Randall observed: “Hawke’s love affair with the voting public is still running hot”. His approval was 74%, and approval of the government 55%.

Hard times, however, were around the corner, with the personal feeding into the political. Hawke’s second year saw his reaction to his daughter’s drug problem, as well as policy challenges contribute to a bad election campaign and a loss of seats at the 1984 poll.

1991: Paul Keating

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Paul Keating, one of the two in our **group** who arrived via a coup, became PM on the back of caucus fears that Hawke mightn’t have a fifth victory in him. Keating’s first year was about readying the Labor government for its fight for survival, shoring up the defences, and turning the heat back on the opposition.

But Keating himself was burdened by having as treasurer presided over what he had infelicitously described as “the recession that Australia had to have”.

When he became PM, unemployment was around 10%, the Coalition well ahead in the polls, and he personally was unpopular. But Keating had the skill set for the task ahead, which was essentially a political one.

The opposition had a massive economic alternative called Fightback! Hawke had had trouble countering it, but Fightback’s radicalism – with a proposed GST, drastic spending cuts, and bold health and industrial relations plans – was always going to be scary to voters.

Keating’s attack style, simultaneously forensic and ferocious and with the ability to make maximum use of the parliamentary forum, was ideal for the demolition task.

Keating quickly sought to deal with the economy with his One Nation package, including tax cuts (later enshrined as L.A.W.) to stimulate the economy. They proved to be a landmine. John Dawkins, treasurer at the time, wrote subsequently: “The promised tax cuts may well have helped win the 1993 election but they became a huge burden later”.

While the economy was the main preoccupation, Keating – especially under the influence of speech writer Don Watson – also started to frame a debate about national identity, including republicanism, which he continued in his second term.

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At the end of the first year, Keating delivered what became famous as his Redfern speech, a national mea culpa for Australia's treatment of its indigenous people and a rallying call for the future.

Years later Prime Minister Tony Abbott (a staffer to opposition leader John Hewson at the time of the address) told parliament: "I could not disagree with its central point: that our failures towards Australia's first people were a stain on our soul. That was a watershed moment for me, as for others".

Earlier in 1992 the High Court had delivered the Mabo judgement, which rejected the argument that Australia had been terra nullius when white settlers arrived. Mabo would be a highly testing second term issue.

The remarkable feature of Keating's first year, I noted in my contemporary assessment, was how he had boosted Labor's political fortunes while the unemployment queues had lengthened rather than shrunk. "He has taken the government from a despairing conviction that it was headed for certain loss to a belief that it is at least in there with a chance."

In early December 1991, just before Keating displaced Hawke, Newspoll had the government trailing the Coalition 36%-51% on primary votes; a year later Keating had turned that around to a Labor **lead** of 47% to 42%. But survival had taken precedence over reform.

He would carry forward his success to clinch the "unwinnable election", but could not sustain the success, becoming out of touch with the public and decisively losing the 1996 election.

1996: John Howard

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In his autobiography, Lazarus Rising, John Howard looks back on what he wanted to achieve when he won office.

Among his goals were to rescue Australia from "debt and deficit" (sound familiar?), "rebalance the narrative about Australia's past," and "change Paul Keating's seemingly Asia-only foreign policy focus".

Howard shared the Keating view that to change the government was to change the country but "I did not come to office resolved to turn the nation on its head". Here are the two strands of Howard: part conviction politician, part pragmatist.

The first budget was tough but well-received, setting the government up. In its initial year the government also took a major step in industrial relations reform, including introducing Australian Workplace Agreements.

The package had to be negotiated with the Australian Democrats, who sanded the harsher edges.

The IR changes, especially after the compromises, were moderate, a sharp contrast with WorkChoices years afterwards, when the PM unleashed his ideology and

there was no Senate restraint to save him from himself. The first year also saw legislation for the part privatisation of Telstra.

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The national gun laws, in the wake of the 1996 Port Arthur massacre that killed 35 people, become a landmark though unexpected Howard reform, one for which he had to take on parts of his own constituency.

The year also lit what flared as the briefly dangerous flame of Hansonism. After Pauline Hanson's maiden speech in September 1996, with its anti-Asian and anti-indigenous views, Howard, understanding that the sentiments resonated with some of his "battlers", did not go hard against her. His handling of Hansonism would become a damaging issue for him, including within his own party.

The Howard team suffered some early casualties, victims of his tough code of conduct; later, the stance became to defend not ditch frontbenchers in trouble.

In December 1996, the High Court handed down the decision in the Wik case that said pastoral leases did not automatically extinguish native title. Like Mabo for the Keating government, Wik would pose a major political challenge.

One year in, Howard said that from Fraser he had learned the importance of keeping on top of the detail; from Hawke the need for "keeping in contact with people".

The first anniversary assessments saw the government as cautious, somewhat accident prone, starting on reform, and making Australia a more conservative place. Journalist Geoff Kitney noted:

In personality, they are as different as chalk and **cheese**, but Howard is running his prime ministership in much the same way as Bob Hawke did. Like Hawke, he believes he is on the same wavelength as the voters. He wants to bring about change at a pace that takes voters with him and doesn't leave them behind.

The big GST gamble was yet to come. Howard's hope, expressed after 12 months, of a decade-long engagement would be more than fulfilled.

2007: Kevin Rudd

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After nearly a dozen years of Coalition government, voters welcomed Kevin Rudd as a fresh face; they had become tired of Howard, and reacted against the extremism of WorkChoices. Paul Kelly described Rudd as "a social moderate, a fiscal conservative and a dedicated economic reformer".

In his election speech, Rudd spoke of “the new challenges that we face in the future”: climate change, water, the digital economy, the rise of **China** and India, hospitals, transforming the education system.

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His government’s first act – starting the process towards the ratification of the Kyoto protocol – combined the substance and symbolism of an issue that helped him to power, and later would contribute to his undoing.

With the opening of parliament in 2008 came Rudd’s historic apology to Australia’s indigenous people, one of the most significant moments of his government.

In April, 1000 people gathered for the 2020 summit, which Rudd described as “throwing open the windows of our democracy, to let a little bit of fresh air in”. The summit had something of the new century’s celebrity politics – among delegates were actors Cate Blanchett and Hugh Jackman – but also a festive 1970s touch.

It was very different from the grey-suited, workmanlike meeting Hawke convened a quarter-century before, although the biggest outcome was an economic initiative – what became the Henry tax inquiry (something the government planned to do anyway).

In the first year the Rudd government dismantled Howard legacy policies in industrial relations and border protection – the latter decision would soon backfire.

But the global financial crisis became the dominant story, a drama that fitted Rudd’s style. He took a prominent role internationally and strongly argued for the G20 – which included Australia – to become the main international forum for dealing with it.

In style Rudd, who’d broken Labor tradition by seizing the right to choose his frontbench, was the classic one-man band.

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He ran an under-experienced office, which he favoured over his cabinet, alienating ministers who didn’t feel willing or able to stand up to him.

He centralised excessive power in the Strategic Budget and Priorities Committee – the gang of four – himself, Gillard, Wayne Swan and Lindsay Tanner. This was necessary during the GFC but the kitchen cabinet would go on to hold close too much of the decision-making for too long.

Kelly assessed that Rudd “engaged in the most centralised, novel and risky experiment in prime ministerial power since Gough Whitlam”. In a review of Rudd’s first six months, academic Anne Tiernan said: “Senior sources report that it is ‘impossible to

exaggerate the degree of personal intervention by the Prime Minister. It's his personality'".

He reportedly joked his office was "Stalag Kevin" - failing to see this wasn't funny.

David Epstein, chief of staff in 2008, gave a devastating indictment of Rudd's management problems. They included an erratic work pattern, getting too little sleep, a chaotic office, and a habit of commissioning multiple briefs but then not reading them because other issues became more pressing.

It would, of course, end in tears. The government went on to keep Australia out of recession but individual programs were badly administered. And key long-term reforms were not successfully prosecuted.

2010: Julia Gillard

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Rudd's style and fear of an election defeat led to the extraordinary events installing Julia Gillard in June 2010. The way she got the job would dog her first and other years. This played out at several levels.

Many voters were mystified and some angry at the overthrow of Rudd. They might have marked him down in the opinion polls, but they were not finished with him.

Gillard said the change of leadership had been needed because a good government had lost its way, but could not properly explain this. Trying to deal with the problems of the past also meant that she could not spell out her agenda for the future.

She came to the prime ministerial job unexpectedly and undercooked and did not have the time, opportunity, skill or clear air to rise to what was needed.

Rudd from the start set out to undermine Gillard. This began, disastrously, in the run up to the August election. Almost certainly the leaks against her cost her majority government.

Her own campaign for the election was bad, with her statement that it was "time for me to make sure that the real Julia is well and truly on display" and other errors. Her promise that there would be "no carbon tax" if she were re-elected would later lethally detonate the trust issue.

The hung parliament meant that Gillard faced an enormous task of keeping her minority government together. This highlighted her negotiating skills but also meant the government existed on the edge of uncertainty, effectively exploited by Abbott as opposition leader.

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Minority government led to the ill-judged alliance with the Greens, when Labor did not need a formal pact because the Greens had nowhere else to go. The Greens extracted their price with the deal on carbon pricing. This trashed Gillard's pre-election promise of a more gradual consensus-based approach to the issue.

With the asylum seeker arrivals escalating, Gillard had raised in the election run up the prospect of processing in East Timor. It soon became clear this could not be delivered.

A quick and dirty deal on the **mining** tax with major companies immediately after she became PM gave away a lot and led to a flawed tax that would raise little revenue but contained inbuilt design faults.

The government's imposition in early June 2011 of a ban on live exports to Indonesia, after Four Corners exposed cruelty to Australian cattle, would spark a backlash from Indonesia and a crisis in the Australian industry.

A year after grabbing the leadership, Gillard was in a parlous position. Labor focus **group** research reportedly had found her seen as "cold and untrustworthy, still haunted by the way she took the job".

Polling of 12 marginal seats in four states found only one in three voters backed the carbon tax.

Rudd, who was foreign minister, was a hovering Banquo's ghost at anniversary time.

A Canberra Times editorial summed up Gillard's failure to make the transition from number 2 to number 1:

As deputy prime minister Ms Gillard was feted for her political acumen, communication skills and ability to make deals. As Prime Minister, the perception is that she has floundered under pressure from an Opposition that has remained in election campaign mode since polling day … a failure to sell its messages has been central to the government's weaknesses.

A Nielsen poll just before the anniversary showed Labor with worse results than a year before, and Rudd way ahead of Gillard as preferred PM. It would be two years before Labor would switch back to Rudd but the chatter was underway.

Gillard could never get her feet properly under the desk because Rudd's shoes remained there.

2013: Tony Abbott

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Tony Abbott's victory was much anticipated but the course of his first year was not. It was full of the surprises he had said would not be part of the way he'd govern. It was also more inept than many expected.

Asked on anniversary day whether there were areas in which he and his government could have done better, Abbott said:

With the wisdom of 20/20 hindsight there are always some things, but we've faced some difficult challenges and I think we've handled them pretty well.

A few days earlier some desperate dealing had pushed the repeal of the **mining** tax through federal parliament. The government had been particularly anxious to achieve this by the anniversary; abolishing the **mining** tax had been one of its election mantras.

As had scrapping the carbon tax, to which the new Senate had also agreed, while defying the government on other aspects of Labor's clean **energy** initiatives.

The government had stopped the boats, another core election commitment. It had been assisted in this by the second Rudd government's harsh offshore detention regime, but also by its own turn-back policy, on which it stared down the Indonesians.

The government could say it had delivered on key election commitments. But the promise to repair the budget brought it enormous political grief, with many of the savings measures highly unpopular with voters and still facing defeat or emasculation in the Senate.

The government had trouble with its message, because it had exaggerated the so-called budget emergency, and had not paid adequate attention to the need for fairness in its measures.

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Surprisingly, Abbott did not heed the lesson from his own campaigning on Gillard's broken promise, which cost her so dearly. He flouted many of those he had made: no new taxes, no cuts in a wide range of areas. He rationalised this by finding ways to claim they weren't actually broken promises.

While opposition leaders are desperate to win elections, it's a fine judgement about how far they should mortgage the future to maximise their chance of victory. Abbott, a sure thing, did not have to give such blanket undertakings of what he would not do. He paid dearly in his first year for his **purchase** of that extra bit of certainty.

On many fronts, the Coalition failed to adequately prepare the community and itself for government. It relied on slogans; promising to be an "adult" government, it did not treat voters as grown-ups.

In its first year the government was highly ideological and excessively tribal, including pursuing two former prime ministers, Rudd and Gillard, though royal commissions, something John Howard has expressed doubts about.

But Abbott also displayed signs of pragmatism. The plan to weaken the Racial Discrimination Act showed the ideology; the abandonment of the plan in the face of huge resistance from ethnic communities and likely Senate defeat was an eye to the politics.

By the end of the year, the government was headed into military conflict in the Middle East, treading a path Howard had been down, though much later in his time in office.

In style, the Abbott government was very centralised. This led to complaints about the Abbott office being too controlling and in particular about the dominance of his powerful chief of staff Peta Credlin.

Poll analyst William Bowe has written that:

no government has ended its first year in a more precarious electoral position certainly since Gough Whitlam, and perhaps even since Jim Scullin brought Labor to power just in time for the Great Depression to strike in 1929.

Reflections on eight leaders over 40 years

Let me conclude with some observations in terms of the criteria I mentioned earlier.

PROGRAM: If a PM arrives with a clear policy map, which has been properly shared with the voters, the new leader can claim a mandate (to the extent mandate theory holds) and, importantly, use the first months to good advantage. However that's not a sure path to smooth government, as Whitlam found.

Moreover as Hawke's experience demonstrates, people will accept policy being taken in an unanticipated direction. But, to adapt a point that Howard has recently made about selling reform, voters need to see that what is done is in the national interest and is fair.

ARRIVING WITH POLITICAL CAPITAL: This ranges from how the PM got the job to the size of the majority. Again, it can be a complicated story. Contrast Keating and Gillard, who each deposed a Labor PM. Gillard's capital was diminished by use of the sword; Keating's was enhanced. People understood the Keating-Hawke changeover; they resented the Gillard-Rudd one. They saw Keating coming; he won a formal vote; Hawke had had a long reign. In contrast, Gillard had not been seen as a challenger by the public, and Rudd's demise was a shock.

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People understood the Hawke-Keating transition.
AAP/Paul Miller

A strong majority is obviously helpful to a government, but arguably the Senate is more important. Abbott has a big majority but a difficult Senate and low personal popularity. Even when there are no parliamentary blocks to action, prime ministers can impose their own, as Fraser's admission of regret shows.

PERSONAL ORGANISATION AND OFFICE: These are vitally important. The PM's own habits set a rhythm for the government and an example to colleagues; a good office empowers the leader and guides team work.

Hawke was organised and had a strong personal staff (dubbed the Manchu Court by Keating) with a balance

between political hard heads and experts like economist Ross Garnaut. They weren't afraid to push him or warn him. At the other end of the spectrum Rudd had a shambolic personal style, including an inability to move paper, and an office unable to do anything about it, even though in the first year it was headed by an experienced operator in David Epstein.

TEAM PLAY: The Whitlam team had no experience of government; the Abbott team has 15 ex-Howard frontbenchers. With the transitions that took place in government, the Keating and Gillard teams were obviously experienced. But a new prime minister, faced with a choice in individual cases between talent and experience, would be wise to opt for the former, which will pay better dividends in the long run.

The inaugural ministry is a special chance. Not that there won't be resentments if a new PM begins by dropping people from his frontbench – as Abbott has found with Ian Macdonald and Fraser discovered, with seriously drastic consequences, when he dumped Don Chipp who went on to found the Australian Democrats.

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HANDLING UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS: The experiences of Howard and Rudd are instructive. Howard's gun reform brought him some short-term political pain but lasting credit. The Rudd government's success in warding off recession when most countries fell into it did not win much appreciation from voters. Did they expect nothing less?

DELIVERING THE MESSAGE: Of these PMs Hawke was the best communicator. Communicating in opposition can be a separate skill from the task in government: Whitlam and Abbott had been superb at punching through messages as opposition leaders (one positive, the other negative). But Whitlam could not rise above his other problems in government and Abbott (so far) hasn't translated into an effective government salesman. Modern spin machines also drain the human face of leaders, as we've seen with both Gillard and Abbott.

FIRST YEAR ASSESSMENTS: A look at the polls at the end of the first year is interesting. In summary the Whitlam, Fraser, Gillard and Abbott governments fell in their first year; the Hawke, Keating, Howard and Rudd governments rose. There is a matching pattern in prime ministerial approval, with the exception of Fraser, whose personal rating rose while that of his government declined (from an extremely high level).

Whitlam and Labor dropped significantly. Labor polled 49.6% primary vote at the 1972 election; Whitlam's approval in the Morgan Gallup poll was 62% in February 1973. At the end of the first year, Labor was on 43% primary vote, according to Morgan, and Whitlam's approval was 45%. Whitlam went on to win an election in May 1974.

Fraser won in 1975 with 53% of the primary vote. On election day, Morgan polling has his approval at 38%. By December 1976, the Coalition's primary vote was down to 47%, while Fraser's approval was 42% (he would go on to win with another whopping majority in 1977).

At the March 1983 election Labor had a primary vote of 49.5%; the Morgan poll showed Hawke's approval at 54%. A year on Morgan had Labor at 55% and Hawke at 74% (but he lost seats in 1984).

Labor was rating at 38% primary vote in a Newspoll a month after Keating took over; his approval was 21%. By the end of his first year Labor had lifted to 47% but he had only made 32%.

Howard had 47% of the primary vote at the election of March 1996; a Newspoll in mid March had him on 45% approval. A year on the Coalition had risen to 49% of the primary vote, and Howard's rating was 51%.

In later years the two party votes are available so we will use that.

Rudd came in on 52.7% of the 2PP; in January 2008 his approval rating was 59%. By his anniversary Labor was polling at 55% 2PP and Rudd was at at 67% in Newspoll. These figures highlight the drama of his later fall and execution.

Although Labor was down in the polls when Gillard took over, an immediate post coup poll had the ALP at 53% 2PP; Gillard's approval the following month was 48%. A year later the two party vote was down to 45% in Newspoll and her approval 28%.

Abbott was elected on 53.5% of the 2PP, and he had a Newspoll popularity rating of 47%. His anniversary Newspoll was 48%, with 35% approval.

LEARNING AND GROWING: It should be easy to learn and grow but politicians who reach the top of the mountain usually have done so with a high degree of self-belief. Growing requires being able to identify mistakes and be willing to address weaknesses. For all of them it is hard: they are not in the "I was wrong" **business**; for some it is impossible.

One example makes the point. At the end of Rudd's first year, Hawke said he should delegate more. Others suggested the pace should be less frenetic.

Rudd was defiant. "If it was possible to handle the challenges we currently face with less urgency, I'd be up for it – but it ain't possible. It's too big and too hard and too broad. We're advancing on multiple fronts, because we have to deal with the immediate challenges of the financial crisis … as well as prosecuting long-term reform."

He would never have been "up for" a slower pace but refusing to be more measured undermined what he did.

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anniversary as PM, September 7. AAP Image/Tracey Nearmy

The view from the top

The first year is the one where, usually, the view from Everest is clear, or relatively so. Mostly the public is willing to give the new PM a go, although by the year's end, reassessments can be underway.

Generally (though not invariably) the PM's authority starts high and those who would challenge it, including an alternative leader, have not yet mustered their forces. The elation of office is a more dominant feeling than the grind of governing or the dread of defeat. At this early stage, even when things are difficult, there still seems time to deal with reversals that have come or that can be seen in prospect.

The inaugural year might not be a prime minister's best one, but it will be very special: brimming with the delight and the shock of the new, and the possibilities that still stretch out to the horizon.

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