

Position vacant: visionary leader with strong character

Both contenders for the top spot seem more like middle-level managers, **TONY GOLSBY SMITH** writes

Tony Abbott has described the election as a "soap opera" but he is wrong. It is much more like a bad version of Donald Trump's *The Apprentice* where we watch desperate young people crawl all over each other in pursuit of a powerful job.

What makes this worse is that it feels more like middle managers applying for that job rather than true leaders.

It does not feel like the contest of ideas between people with a compelling picture of what it will take for this country to be successful in future generations.

One of the factors driving this mediocrity is the rise of focus groups as a major way to inform policy.

Julia Gillard and Abbott are reading from scripts, and cautiously treading through a minefield of what *not* to say that has been mapped out for them by spin doctors on the back of focus groups.

Unfortunately, there is no focus on

leadership so their tactics are backfiring. What we have seen during this campaign raises a critical question of leadership: do we want leaders who merely represent us, or do we want leaders who actually lead us – even in decisions that we might find uncomfortable?

When my wife and I were sending our five-year-old to her first day at school she was in floods of tears. This exasperated us because she had been looking forward to it for weeks.

So we asked her whether she wanted to go to school or not. She memorably blurted out, "I do, but I don't."

We are all like five-year-olds facing our first day at school when it comes to change. Part of us wants it and part of us does not. Leadership is about knowing which voice to listen to.

It was Aristotle who claimed that

while leaders could make decisions and build arguments, what made them really compelling was their character.

We can all test this insight. Just ask people what they think about a speech made by a political leader.

Most of their comments won't be about the substance of their ideas, but about their character. The only window we have into someone's character, and particularly someone we don't know personally, is their language.

Eventually that language will have to grow into decisions and from that to actions.

Leadership starts with character. For thousands of years, wise philosophers have identified three key qualities that are essential in the character of a leader. The first is vision, the second is mental agility,

and the third is empathy. The Ancient Greeks famously called them "ethos", "logos" and "pathos".

You cannot succeed without all three, and they are often contradictory which makes it hard to get the whole package in a single person. But if you do, the leader resonates with the public and they start to believe that their future is in good hands.

Kevin Rudd's demise was sudden and unexpected, but not if you apply the "leadership triad".

When we elected him, the nation had endured over a decade of "comfort" from John Howard but not much in the way of vision, and Rudd appeared to have a much bigger picture of what could make Australia successful.

He spoke Chinese for a start, and he seemed prepared to lead the world on global warming.

Most people are like me about global warming; it scares us and we would rather ignore it, but deep down we know we have got to do something about it. But at the first chance Rudd got to turn his vision into action, he wilted.

This was not just a policy decision, it seemed to show a crack in his character; his "ethos" suddenly seemed fake.

Once you lose credibility around the "ethos" part of leadership, it is a steep fall and a long way back.

That is because it touches our deep sense of purpose – and nothing is more fundamental to human beings than having purpose.

Gillard was pretty impressive as a deputy leader but seems smaller as a leader.

Competence and mental agility get you a long way as deputy but once

you become a leader they start to look ordinary very quickly.

So it was fatal to her leadership aura when she announced the citizens' assembly on global warming. She was over-reacting to Rudd's autocratic style and went too far.

After all, this was the very issue that pulled the rug from under Rudd's credibility, and here she is declaring that she also has no vision – so she will ask us for one.

Abbott cannot believe his luck on the sidelines and the public have warmed to him.

His gaffes seem to make him human, although they clearly are stupid and a bit of a worry.

But they make him seem more candid and more like us; who has not put his foot in his mouth from time to time?

Most importantly they seem to free him from the image of being the puppet of the spin doctors.

In fact, Abbott is scoring quite high on the empathy factor in the leadership triad because he seems closer to us.

But Abbott runs the risk of looking scatter-brained and that will catch up with him sooner rather than later.

You cannot run a country without some grasp of the big issues and a sense of the broad game – and he feels too impulsive to do this.

But Abbott's big deficit is the same as Gillard's – they seem to lack core beliefs that are more important to them than getting elected.

That matters to Australia because we need leaders, not middle managers, to take us forward.

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