

THE SAME BLUE TIE?

By

Angus Duncan

Watching the second leader's forum the other day I was struck by one thing, both Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott wearing the exact same shade of blue tie. Such a poor fashion choice certainly serves to fuel claims that there isn't much difference between Labor and the Coalition. However, a closer look at the key policies of both the major parties reveals some key points of difference, but only just.

Let's start with the economy and the search for the elusive surplus, as that remains the number one issue for Australian voters. The plan to bring Australia back into surplus really focuses on how to boost productivity. Labor have taken a holistic future proof approach to improve Australia's education system supported by tax, welfare and regulatory reform along with the roll out of their NBN. The Coalition, on the other hand, have pledged to improve productivity by reducing red tape by \$1 billion a year through tax and regulatory reform, reducing the public service size and amending industrial relation laws. The difference is clear, long-term change verses short term reform, although both focus on regulatory reforms

Next is asylum seekers and securing Australia's borders. There is no difference between the policies of Labor and the Coalition as both sides have decided to politicise people seeking protection. Labor's solution is to send all asylum seekers to Papua New Guinea (PNG) with their PNG Solution. I will say, for a party that prides itself on supporting those in need, their solution appears to be at odds with their philosophy. The Coalition's solution, as always, is to slam the doors on asylum seekers by turning back the boats where it is safe to do so and by buying old boats from Indonesian fisherman. The choice really is between inhumanity and even more inhumanity. I make no apologies for my strong views when it comes to asylum seekers as both major parties just don't get it. The absolute terror that asylum seekers must be escaping for them to risk their lives on a long narrow leaky boat is lost in the debate. My own view is to deal with the root of the problem rather than the end of the journey.

The third major policy is education. Here there is little difference between Labor and the Coalition as both sides have agreed to support the Better Schools Reform (formerly Gonski reform). However, there is a big difference when it comes to the time frame for reform. Labor's agreement is for six years, whilst the Coalition supports the agreement for the first four years. Timeframe aside, the overall policy is the same. However, as students this is bad news for us, as funding will be cut to universities on either account. This funding cut is appalling as universities are the place where new ideas, new technologies and new innovations are created. To turn your back on universities is to turn your back on the development of Australia.

Healthcare remains one of the biggest spending areas for the Federal government, accounting for 16% of the 2013 budget. How and where money is pumped into healthcare makes it one of the most hotly contested political areas. Despite some differences on funding to hospitals, medical research and the pharmaceutical benefit schemes, the point of difference, as one would expect, is the private health insurance rebate. Labor is continuing with its means tested rebate introduced in July 2012, while the Coalition wants to scrap the means test. The other point of difference is healthcare governance. Under Labor's National Health Reform Agreement several federal bureaucracies were setup to administer the reforms. The Coalition has said it wants to reduce the size of the bureaucracy and leave hospitals to continue to be state-run. There are clear differences between the two policies, but whether these policies can deal with the never-ending list of issues in the Australian public healthcare sector remains to be seen.

Finally, the environment. Both the major parties have promised to reduce Australia's emissions by 5% by 2020, however, under two different approaches. The Coalition's *Direction Action Plan* (DAP) aims to tackle carbon emission by piggybacking on Labor's *Carbon Farming Initiative* (CFI). DAP plans to reduce emissions at a lower cost by managing soil carbon sequestration, managing forests, improving farming efficiency and cleaning up power stations. Labor has since turned their back on their carbon tax, to be shelved a year earlier than previously planned, and has instead reverted back to their *emissions trading scheme* (ETS); the same policy voted upon in the 2007 election. The ETS works by placing a 'cap' on the total amount of carbon pollution released across the country and requiring around 370 large businesses to purchase "carbon permits" equal to the pollution they create. The similarity is that both policies plan to tackle climate change by engaging, to some extent, with the CFI. Putting aside what each party plans to do, any party that can find a balance between the environmental interests of the Government and the interests of industry will win the environmental debate. So far, each policy proposed seems to support one or the other rather than balancing both.

So how can I conclude this comparison between Labor and the Coalition? I can't rid my mind of Abbott and Rudd's blue ties. There is something to the policy similarities between Labor and the Coalition. Economically, both sides want regulatory reform. With regard to asylum seekers, both sides fail to understand the human element. For education, both sides want Gonski. Funding remains the same for healthcare. And environmentally, both parties plan to use the CFI one way or another. Either way, both Labor and the Coalition have a plan and both plan to deliver.