



Blood-letting must stop if Rudd is to win

*At last, Labor has a chance to end the party's revenge cycle, says **Dennis Glover***

ONE day out hunting in a wood, Agamemnon — king of Mycenae and commander of the Greek expedition to Troy — killed a stag and boasted he was a finer hunter than the goddess Artemis who, in retribution, held the Greek fleet wind-bound in the harbour of Aulis. In return for a fair wind to carry the Greeks to Troy to avenge the abduction of Agamemnon's sister-in-law Helen, Artemis demanded a blood sacrifice — Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia.

Having conquered Troy and recaptured Helen, the king returned to Mycenae, whereupon, to avenge the sacrifice of her daughter, his wife Clytemnestra savagely stabbed him to death in his bath, before butchering his concubine, Cassandra, with an axe.

Eight years later, Agamemnon's son, Orestes, encouraged by his surviving sister, Electra, returned to avenge his father's death by beheading his own mother and her lover, Aegisthus. To exact revenge in turn, Orestes was hunted down by his uncle Menelaus, pursued by the female furies, the Erinyes, and brought to trial before the Areopagus in Athens.

Does this sound familiar? Conservative educationalists have got a

point: we've still got a lot to learn from the classics, and this applies especially to the Australian Labor Party. The fate of the house of Pelops, told by Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides, warns us what happens when humans get caught up in a revenge cycle. Let's think of the possible story the Greek playwrights could spin from the struggles between Kim Beazley, Simon Crean, Mark Latham, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard.

A trapped Beazley, hoping for the electoral winds to carry him to victory, is forced to sacrifice principle to necessity during the Tampa crisis. Going into exile, he is replaced by Crean. Crean, paying for his party's moral failure, is brutally butchered by Beazley's followers, but is unexpectedly replaced by Latham. Latham, pursued by his own furies, escapes assassination to die by his own hand, placing a death-bed curse on the house of Labor.

Back on his throne, Beazley is stalked by a new alliance, Rudd and Gillard, urged on by others wanting to even up for the destruction of Crean and Latham. Beazley falls — the tragedy and pathos highlighted by heartbreaking personal loss — and is replaced again.

At every bloody step, each gen-

eration thinks that it alone can stop the cycle with a swift, decisive and final thrust of the dagger or drop of the axe. But of course it can't. Instead of learning the real lessons of defeat, Labor's warring generations appear only to have sharpened their tactics, which are becoming depressingly familiar: the drip, drip, drip of the Newspoll; the secretly conducted leaked party research; the off-the-record back-grounding and on-the-record support; the failed first challenge, followed inevitably by the second; with the cycle ended by the tap on the shoulder from the party's elder statesmen or a snap vote after a weekend of furious number counting. Around it goes, perhaps ending only with the election as leader of someone not yet in parliament, not stained by the party's curse. Clearly, more blood is not the answer to Labor's problem.

Sure it's possible to over-intellectualise what's happening to the ALP, but in my view "revenge" is a sharp prism through which to view the tragedy of modern Labor. Left-Right, modernisers-traditionalists, union-branches, Victoria-NSW — none of these usual divides adequately



explains yesterday's outcome. While there was a clear generational difference between the sides, there wasn't a clear philosophical one. In fact, both leadership teams supported pretty similar versions of modern social democracy, which emphasise the synergies between economic prosperity, education, individual freedom, tolerance and sustainability.

And leadership rivalries have not been Labor's only problem. The lack of unity and the instinct for revenge has radiated outwards. To someone who has observed federal Labor from close range for some time, it's obvious that the problem hasn't been so much the numerous jockeys as the horse. And by the horse I don't just mean the federal parliamentary Labor Party or the party's official machine, the weaknesses of which have been exposed savagely in recent years by Latham and others. The entire Australian Centre-Left has been outplayed by the Right and has been at war with itself.

A decade on from losing office, Labor and the Centre-Left have still, inexplicably, failed to create an alliance of authoritative think tanks and commentators to fash-

ion a new political agenda and fight for it in the court of public opinion, as conservatives have done. Almost as one, the thinkers and commentators of the Centre-Left have condemned Labor as morally compromised, with policies too close to those of the Coalition, when in reality Labor and the Coalition have seldom been as different as they are today. As a result, Labor's most articulate extra-parliamentary champions have been sucked into the whirlpool of condemnation and revenge, taking sides and making every leadership coup part of a wider civil war. Centre-Left commentators and thinkers need to take a long hard look at their own role in perpetuating the revenge cycle that's helped keep their opponents in power. As the Greeks may have said, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

So along with the call to unity within Labor, must go the call to unity of the anti-Coalition forces outside Labor. Rudd and Gillard must now create the basis of future Labor success by building a machine that can win back power in the years ahead. What's needed is not just a new leadership team, but

also consistent support for it.

Unless common sense now prevails, yesterday's outcome offers no clean break for Labor and no end to its savage revenge cycle. Should Rudd lose the next election, Labor's nightmare is that the cycle will start anew, featuring all the wrong lessons learned so far.

So what's the solution for the ALP? Unsurprisingly, the Greeks provide an answer: for a revenge cycle to end, an occupant of the throne needs to die in his or her bed. Only a natural death can hand a successor the legitimacy, unity, stability and time needed to build a case for government. Rudd must be allowed to have his fate decided by the voters, not ambitious and vengeful rivals.

It's perfectly possible that the new Labor leader can win in 2007, but should he fail, the final judgment on him must be made by the voters in 2010 or afterwards. Otherwise, Labor's woes will continue.

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