

# Would Kevin handle the Stone cold truth?

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- From: The Daily Telegraph
- June 12, 2010 12:00AM
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**A FEW weeks ago, as the Prime Minister's opinion poll ratings began their remarkable dive, I received a text message from Shane Stone.**

"Someone should write Kevin Rudd a memo," it said.

The reference, of course, was to the famous memo that Stone himself - then federal president of the Liberal Party - handed to John Howard in February 2001.

Astonishingly frank and intended for Howard only, it warned that the government was on the nose - regarded as mean, tricky, dysfunctional and out of touch.

Stone said there was concern among Liberals that Howard and treasurer Peter Costello were not listening and had gone out of their way to antagonise the party's traditional base.

The memo listed policies, actions and decisions that had alienated voters and suggested what should be done about them.

When, eventually, the memo was leaked to me and published, it caused shock.

There was supposed to be only one copy in existence, stored in the PM's office.

By then, though, Howard had acted on the suggestions and support for the Coalition was on the way up again.

Stone's bluntness had saved the Howard government.

The message about Rudd was spot on too. Like Howard, he needed a trusted adviser to bring unpleasant home truths to his attention - but it didn't happen.

The current president of the Labor Party - someone called Michael Williamson from the Health Services Union - certainly lacks the stature and experience to do a Stone. I wonder if the PM even knows who he is.

Rudd might have taken notice of a former federal ALP president John Faulkner, but Faulkner is too busy as Defence Minister to pen a memo of political advice that might save the Government's bacon.

So I phoned Stone - who no longer holds any Liberal Party position - and asked what kind of memo he would write to the PM now if he was an ALP official.

"I'd tell Rudd he should spend more time listening to the people who put him there - the members of the Labor Party. When I wrote the memo to Howard there was a yawning gap between the party membership and the government. That's what it was all about," Stone said.

"And that's where Rudd is at the moment. He has this massive disconnect. He is disconnected from the electorate and from the party membership. He should zip it and sit and listen."

But the truth is that Stone thinks it is too late for any advice to be of much help.

"Have you ever seen such a dramatic change, so quickly, in the way a leader is regarded. If I was running Labor I'd move him on," Stone said.

"I'd do what the Liberals did with Malcolm Turnbull when members were walking away over the ETS.

"Julia Gillard is not as toxic by any stretch of the imagination as Kevin Rudd has become."

In the Howard memo, Stone was able to point to policies and mistakes that could be changed or fixed.

The superannuation surcharge. Problems with petrol excise. Reluctance to approve a special medal for national servicemen.

In Rudd's case, however, while policy bumbles have played a part, the real issue now is one of character.

No advice will turn things around if voters have decided the PM stands for little, is heavy on talk but light on action, and fails to think things through. Or, as retail mogul Gerry Harvey put it so eloquently in discussing the botched selling of the resources super profits tax, that Rudd heads a team of "bloody amateurs".

Having bungled the politics of the tax, Rudd finds himself in a vicious circle. Initially the miners' aim was to force changes to the tax but then Rudd's spectacular poll slump opened up the possibility of killing it off altogether - and possibly the Government with it.

Without a poll boost for Labor, there is no incentive for the miners to deal; every reason, in fact, for them to step up their campaign.

But a Labor upturn is unlikely while the mining struggle dominates headlines.

Says a gloomy Labor MP: "We need the focus to be on Abbott, but this issue guarantees that the focus stays on us."

A Stone memo to Rudd would warn: "It's a twitchy world out there . People want certainty. You are adding to uncertainty."

It should be said that not everyone in Labor and the Government lacks the courage to speak up. The problem is that, for the first two years, Rudd's popularity was so high that his office could answer critics by simply pointing to the polls.

Rudd's biggest mistake, though, may have been not listening to a group who - after the Liberal leadership change - urged him to call an election in February.

The Government's climate credibility would have been intact. Abbott would have been vulnerable. Rudd was tempted - but blinked.

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