

Among its many problems, the Abbott government is showing distinctly cannibalistic tendencies.

It's not just a matter of the odd leak, which happens in the healthiest of administrations. This is serious dog-eat-dog stuff – or dogs snapping back when they're bitten.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop did not even resort to “backgrounding” to reveal she had initially been refused permission by the Prime Minister's Office to attend the Lima climate conference this week.

[She told the Financial Review](#) in an interview “I requested and it was refused so I requested again”. Last week it was reported she was mightily provoked that Tony Abbott had decided, without consultation, to send Trade Minister Andrew Robb to accompany her.

More dangerous for the government is the assault on Treasurer Joe Hockey, and the fightback from the Hockey camp that we've seen in News Corp papers.

A Friday Daily Telegraph story [claimed](#) “several cabinet ministers” were among senior Coalition MPs said to be losing faith in Hockey's ability to deliver the government's message, adding that “some in the Liberal Party are starting to question whether Malcolm Turnbull could do a better job if Mr Hockey fails to lift his game”.

The next day, The Australian [reported](#) that a campaign to destabilise Hockey had been undermined by revelations that the Prime Minister's Office had made selling the need for budget cuts harder by insisting on delaying the release of the Audit Commission report.

The ins and outs of the stories are less important than that they point to internal plays.

The effects are insidious. Not only do the stories give a public impression of disunity but they

fuel distrust and ill-feeling in the highest ranks of the government – as do the indications of ministerial manoeuvrings for bigger or better jobs (notably by that man-in-a-hurry, Scott Morrison), and the constant though usually anonymous criticisms of Abbott's chief of staff Peta Credlin.

Abbott defended Credlin in his end-of-year speech to parliament as “the fiercest political warrior I've ever worked with” – perhaps an unfortunate choice of language given some ministers and staff think she's altogether too often on the warpath against them.

It's only performance and better polls that will contain the infighting and positioning, but there is no sign of either.

Monday's [Fairfax/Ipsos poll](#) has the Coalition trailing Labor 48-52%. Abbott's approval has fallen four points in a month to 38% and his preferred prime minister rating is down two points to 39%. Bill Shorten leads as preferred prime minister 47-39%.

Much of the attention out of this poll has focused on trust. Abbott is regarded as trustworthy by only 36% – where Julia Gillard was shortly before being deposed. It was the budget that blasted a hole in trust – in July, 35% regarded Abbott as trustworthy. But the more promises are broken, the stronger the reinforcement that this government is dodgy.

What an irony, then, that to help his credibility Abbott finally has had to foreshadow that he'll pare back his paid parental leave plan – the one promise he's been most reluctant to breach.

It was an inevitability. The plan (already modified in April) was not going to get through the Senate. The Productivity Commission in its July draft report argued the case for diverting some of the PPL funds to child care.

Prime Ministerial aspiration and pride collided with reality.

It would have been better to have made the retreat earlier. Equally, when the backdown came, it would have been cleaner to have put out the whole PPL-child care package in a major announcement.

Instead we've had a West Wing-type "take out the trash" exercise. Abbott confirmed on Sunday – when the Murray report on the financial system was a big story to help shelter the backdown – that the PPL will be altered. Of course, before the announcement came the pre-release to the Sunday News Corp papers.

We know some of the money will go to child care; we don't know how much, or the shape of the PPL changes.

One can see that orchestrating how to make that backdown might have involved some judgements about tactics.

It should not have taken much judgement at all to know the advertising campaign the government has just launched to promote its higher education changes is neither proper nor likely to be very effective.

The TV ad is obscure and misleading – it implies the government is continuing the same proportion of funding for students, rather than reducing it.

This is political advertising which should not be financed by the taxpayer in any circumstances, let alone when the legislation has been voted down in the Senate, with its future parliamentary fate uncertain.

And how does the government justify spending taxpayer dollars which we're told are so short? Here's what a spokesman for Education Minister Christopher Pyne says.

"Between July and September 2014, the Department of Education attended 45 tertiary studies

and careers exhibitions, and university open day events across Australia. The purpose of attending these events was to provide students with information about Australian Government assistance for tertiary study, and the proposed higher education reforms announced in the 2014-15 Budget.

“Feedback from attendees at these events indicated that there was a consistent lack of understanding of Australia’s current higher education system, in particular the status of HECS.

“On this basis, the Department of Education engaged a specialist research organisation to examine the extent to which this feedback reflected broader views and understanding of the higher education system. The research indicated a need for an information campaign to raise community awareness on our higher education system.”

And the cost of the “information” campaign? That will be released “in due course”.

But don’t worry. “The Government is spending far less on information campaigns than the previous government did.”

Anyone surprised that people are cynical?

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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