

Tony Abbott's "captain's pick" of [Prince Philip for a knighthood](#) – on Australia Day, and when he says the government should consult more – suggests the Prime Minister's head is in some very strange place.

There is no credible, rational explanation. If Abbott was travelling strongly, one might write it off as some monarchist/anglophile indulgence. But with his standing so low that he's being asked in the media about the future of his leadership, and remembering the bollocking he received over his "knights and dames" initiative, why would he deliberately attract a beating and, worse, widespread ridicule?

Announcing the new honour last year, Abbott highlighted it being for "Australians of 'extraordinary and pre-eminent achievement and merit' in their service to Australia or to humanity at large". How Philip fits is a mystery. One government man described the appointment as a "barbecue stopper on a day when everyone is having a barbecue".

Abbott has started 2015 in a worse state than he ended 2014, when he was trying to remove the barnacles.

Abbott should, as much as possible, have kept out of the limelight over January. Instead, despite taking some holidays, he seemed to be much in the public eye and ear.

Yes, Abbott had to inspect the bushfire areas. But did he need to go to Iraq, a trip involving a stoush with media that had been left behind? And was it essential to do radio interviews that simply invited leadership questioning?

Among the government's woes has been January's backflip on December's Medicare compromise. The December changes included slashing the rebate for very short consultations from mid-January. When it seemed clear this cut would be disallowed as soon as parliament resumed, and, under fire from doctors and backbenchers, Abbott abandoned the measure. He was further embarrassed by a leak that Treasurer Joe Hockey and then-Health Minister Peter Dutton had advised against the December changes.

In education, another compromise has been flagged this month to the universities deregulation package. It would further reduce the savings, but the detail and the package's fate remain up in the air.

Over the summer backbenchers have become more agitated after copping their voters' views.

No-one thinks Abbott's leadership is in short-term danger. But memory of the Labor Rudd-Gillard-Rudd fiasco doesn't provide him with automatic protection in the longer term. If his office thought that, it wouldn't be so paranoid about Malcolm Turnbull.

There is some safety, perhaps, in the fact there is not a single alternative, if it came to that, but several who balance each other off. Apart from Turnbull, forced by his past to step carefully, there's the indefatigable Julie Bishop; Joe Hockey, seriously down but he hopes not out forever; and the ambitious Scott Morrison, who this year in his new Social Services job – which covers families policy – will try to graft a more human face onto his hard-man persona.

Governments in trouble blame messaging and the Abbott office's communications team has been revamped. Previous press office director Jane McMillan was chopped unceremoniously from that position just before Christmas. Andrew Hirst, Abbott's main spokesman in opposition who has been deputy chief of staff in government, will again head the communications effort.

But Abbott's problems run far deeper than poor and muddled spin. They are fundamentally about product, including policy and personnel. They embrace the past and the present, but have now become a serious constraint on what can be done in the future.

The budget proved an indigestible disaster, now privately regretted at senior levels as the bitter dregs linger. Looking ahead, the government does not have the political capital to take robust outcomes from its current reviews of taxation, industrial relations and federalism to the 2016 election. And Abbott, never popular personally, has become deeply distrusted in the electorate, with his broken promises adding mightily to the voter cynicism he fanned with his attacks on Julia Gillard.

On Saturday the Liberals will get a rebuff at the Queensland election, from which Abbott has been conspicuously absent. While state issues are dominating, Labor is seeking to capitalise on Abbott's unpopularity. An expected big swing against the Newman government will be read as having some federal implications, whatever its cause. More to the point, some of Newman's perceived faults – arrogance, seeming to be out of touch – are Abbott's problems.

On Monday, Abbott faces the rigours of an address to the National Press Club. His MPs don't return for the start of the parliamentary year until the following week, but his performance will be important for their mood. He needs something to say, and no missteps in what can be a testing forum.

The coming few weeks will be dominated by the struggle to get the university changes through the Senate; the continuing row about what's left of the Medicare reforms; and Hockey's release of the tax discussion paper and the latest intergenerational report. Hockey hopes the latter will help convince people of the case for budget and tax reforms. National security will also be in the early weeks' mix, with reporting on the Sydney siege and security co-ordination arrangements, and the proposed metadata retention regime still a challenge.

Abbott said on Monday that "we probably need to be a more consultative and collegial government in the 12 months ahead" and "I think we need to be more conscious of the realities in the parliament".

True but obvious. And this is not the first time Abbott has expressed such sentiments. There are a few other things needed. For starters: a saleable May budget; realism in the reform agenda; and a better performance by Abbott himself (and his office, which always gets down to a discussion about chief of staff Peta Credlin). Each is hard, maybe impossible, to achieve.

Given the numbers and last year's legacy, how does the government produce an acceptable budget?

With inquiries underway, what can it say to reassure people on tax and industrial relations, especially when it is caught between a resistant electorate and a baying business sector?

And how can Abbott repair an image now as bad as that of Gillard when she was prime minister?

Despite the fashionability of the idea of “rebooting”, there is no one reset button. Abbott has had his ministerial reshuffle, which strengthened the team, but that can only bring limited benefit.

In the first half of the year Abbott’ll launch his families package, which will cut his planned paid parental leave scheme (his “signature policy” and lengthy farce) and recalibrate child care. In theory it’s a chance to do something positive, but can he get it right?

In politics lots can change very quickly, and everything is comparative. Bill Shorten has been doing well largely because Abbott has been looking bad.

Shorten will be under more scrutiny this year. Eventually voters will face the question of whether Labor is up to the task of governing again.

But it’s Abbott who is under the most intense and immediate pressure. As the 2015 political year gears up, the central question will be whether Abbott is up to the job of being prime minister. So far, he has not shown that he is.

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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