

## What's wrong with Team Abbott is a lot bigger than the Credlin problem

Written by The Conversation

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Tony Abbott's right-hand woman Peta Credlin is in an invidious position. Not only are many Coalition figures wanting her removed, but now Rupert Murdoch [says](#) it's her "patriotic duty" to fall on her sword.

Abbott stands firmly by her. But the pressure has reached such a level that it must make her job, difficult in any circumstances, unbelievably hard in 2015. In that position, any responsible staffer must give thought to what is in the best interests of their boss and themselves – whether to stare down or step back or away.

The Murdoch intervention is damaging because it escalates the issue and, given its timing, it may feed the paranoia about leadership threats that already exists in the Prime Minister's Office.

A lot of people, including in the Coalition, will see this as a gratuitous gesture by a powerful man who loves to make political players jump.

But what Murdoch says may encourage the plethora of Credlin critics – they'll read it as Murdoch, like themselves, being worried that Abbott could take his government to a defeat.

They could also note News Corp columnist Miranda Devine's [advice on Wednesday](#) that Credlin should be replaced by former Coalition staffer and current Australian editorial writer Chris Kenny, whom Credlin "didn't want to hire as head of communications strategy, despite various entreaties from high-level media and political figures".

Kenny would be "fearless and confident enough to challenge the cosy consensus thinking in the PM's office that let the Philip gong see the light of day", Devine wrote.

The fact the Murdoch call-out on Credlin appeared soon after he met Foreign Minister Julie Bishop when she was in the United States will not escape the PMO.

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Bishop and Credlin had a test of strength late last year, notwithstanding claims they were on the best of terms. They are rivals for influence with Abbott, despite occupying such different positions. Also, in the recent public chatter about the future of Abbott's leadership, Bishop is now up there with Malcolm Turnbull as an alternative. The PMO has always been touchy about Turnbull; surely it must be getting a little concerned about Bishop, who seems to get nothing but good publicity and is popular everywhere she goes.

The Bishop-Murdoch meeting was strictly private, so we don't know whether Bishop's opinion about Credlin's influence was mentioned. The timing of the encounter and the specific Twitter references to Credlin might have been entirely coincidental. But those in Abbott's office will no doubt wonder.

The Murdoch assault on Credlin comes on the back of Abbott's disastrous decision to award Prince Philip a knighthood, which Murdoch strongly condemned and many Credlin critics believe she should have prevented.

Abbott said on Wednesday he did not consult her about the appointment, though surely it is unlikely she had no knowledge of what was happening.

Attacks on her over the knighthood are however a case of blaming the dog you've already given a bad name. The appalling judgement was Abbott's and he must (and is willing to) take full responsibility for what he's done.

More generally though, it's been clear for a long time that Credlin has exercised enormous influence over Abbott, who feels excessively in her debt for the role she played in him winning government.

A prime minister's skill set should include the ability to get together a strong and broad advisory team, including not just staff and ministers, but backbenchers and people from the community, and then to know what and how much advice to take. Abbott has got neither balance right.

And super-adviser Credlin has displayed a blind spot about her own role. For one perennially

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accused of exercising too much control, Credlin has failed dismally to manage her situation. Through both her actions and her high profile, she has become a focal point for critics wanting to find fault with Abbott without confronting him directly.

Credlin throws her weight around in Abbott's name, which invites others to apply their counter-weight. Politicians have a well-developed sense of status; some will be cowed by a prime minister's staffer but others will fight. Staff in other offices who have felt the whip will relish the chance to get back at their tormentor.

Things have become so bad that Credlin is now being made a scapegoat for almost everything that Abbott gets wrong. That of course is ridiculous, although she deserves some of the blame, especially for making him much less inclusive than he should be.

The Credlin problem is clear; the solution is as elusive as when she was a topic of intense discussion late last year.

Murdoch's resort to what Abbott likes to call the graffiti of social media has just complicated the situation in that, if Credlin departed any time soon, it would be seen as Abbott doing Murdoch's bidding.

Of course if Credlin did go, there is the distinct possibility that things mightn't get better, because what's wrong in Team Abbott is much bigger than Credlin. It's the captain himself, with or without advice, making too many bad calls.

*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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