

## Sinodinos weighs into leadership crisis with tough critique of Abbott government

Written by The Conversation

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In 2001, after a disastrous Queensland election result, then Liberal federal president Shane Stone wrote his famous memo reporting that the Howard government was seen as “mean and tricky”, out of touch and not listening to the electorate.

The memo caused massive trouble when later leaked, but by then John Howard had absorbed the lessons and undertaken repairs.

Senator Arthur Sinodinos, then Howard’s chief of staff, recalled the problems of 2001 in his swingeing intervention in the Liberal leadership crisis on Wednesday.

Interviewed on Sky, Sinodinos delivered a verbal memo on the government’s shortcomings and what had to be done.

It contained some sledgehammer blows for Abbott. “I’ve always supported Tony Abbott ... but that support ongoing is not unconditional – it’s based on being able to grapple with the issues we face at the moment, which appear to have impacted on our standing in the polls”. When asked whether Abbott will be leader in a week, he said: “Comrade, come and ask me next week!”

Until Sinodinos’s emergence, the public attacks were being run by marginal figures, such as West Australian [backbencher Dennis Jensen](#), who has urged a spill next week. Sinodinos, despite his recent troubled history, is a heavyweight in both policy and political experience.

His core message to the Liberal party is: identify the government’s problems, then assess who can best handle them. If alternatives to Abbott emerge, ask what they offer and how equipped they are to rectify things.

Sinodinos was forced to stand aside as assistant treasurer last March when the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption called him as a witness. The reports affecting him are yet to appear. Abbott stuck by him for many months but finally had him quit the ministry to

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facilitate the pre-Christmas reshuffle.

Sinodinos was angry with the Prime Minister's Office when his resignation leaked prematurely. The tension went back further. Abbott in opposition had flagged to Sinodinos that he wanted him as finance minister; the Prime Minister's chief of staff, Peta Credlin, is credited with heading that off.

While Sinodinos is not an entirely disinterested critic, his analysis of the government's situation is sound.

He dismissed any notion the leadership talk was "media hype"; the reason for it was that there'd been "a number of events in recent times which have raised questions about our direction, as a party and as a government".

The government needed to connect with the public; revise or drop unpopular policies, and change the way the budget is prepared.

On the hot topic of the Medicare co-payment: "We either design one that is appropriate and equitable, or we drop the concept and look for other ways to restrain health spending," he said.

"We have to change the way we do budgets so that there is a lot more transparency around what is being considered and why." That might go against canons about market sensitivity and the like but "we have got to ventilate options, and we have got to engage stakeholders and the community as a whole in an honest conversation".

Sinodinos highlighted the issue of fairness, a weak point of the 2014 budget and something [Maicolm Turnbull stressed](#) in a recent speech. "We need to make sure our spending is appropriately targeted but we need to consult the electorate about how we do that in a fair and equitable way, which properly shares the burden of adjustment across the community," Sinodinos said.

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He predicted the backbench will become much more assertive on policy, in the party room and the community. “Unless we engage the community and show the community we’re actively looking at the pros and cons of options and that we, as members of the party room, understand their concerns and are acting on them, I think we will lose touch with the broader community.”

The party had to be “very conscious of the everyday concerns of our fellow Australians” and show that “fairness in how we do things is going to be very important in framing the next budget”.

The political adviser in Sinodinos praised Abbott as “the Black Caviar” who delivered the election. But he rejected the Abbott tactic of trying to extract guarantees that he would not be challenged. “I don’t think either Julie Bishop or Malcolm Turnbull should be put in a position where their loyalty is questioned”.

Earlier Education Minister Christopher Pyne had explained Bishop’s delay in issuing Tuesday’s loyalty statement by saying she’d been insulted and offended “about the idea that she wasn’t totally loyal ... she felt that she didn’t need to prove her loyalty”.

Sinodinos urged putting some order in the current chaotic debate about whether to change leaders.

“It’s hypothetical to talk about a leadership contest – no one’s put their hand up and no one’s offered an alternative program.

“That’s why I’m saying, if we’re contemplating any of this, what is it exactly that we’re seeking to do, and how would it improve our situation? These are the sort of questions which are in the minds of backbenchers.

“At the moment it is a conversation about people asking each other what is going on.

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“Unless and until someone else declares, it’s academic to discuss the merits of other people because we don’t know what is on offer.”

The problem in the prescription is that neither Turnbull nor Bishop wants to put themselves out there ahead of a clear indication the party room is ready to dump Abbott. It’s chicken and egg. In contemplating a spill many MPs would want to know who, if it were carried, would then put their hands up. But if Turnbull or Bishop openly signalled their availability beforehand, and a spill motion was lost, they could not then remain in the cabinet.

Listen to the latest [Politics with Michelle Grattan podcast](#) here. Mathias Cormann speaks about the Liberal leadership crisis.

*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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