

The cameras were in the cabinet room on Monday, apparently so the TV stations could get footage of the new lineup after last year's reshuffle. But also Tony Abbott wanted to get a message out – one he's trying to turn into a prop for his leadership.

The message is – as Kevin Rudd might say - that he and the team have their sleeves rolled up.

The government was “working hard for the people of Australia”, who wanted “people in Canberra” to be “worried about them” rather than worried about themselves (“ourselves,” he means).

He reeled off the last week's work, relating to national security, welfare reform, child care, food labelling, foreign investment. Much of this, of course, involved first steps, but the important thing was the list.

Then for this week, Abbott pointed to metadata retention legislation coming before parliament, and the release of the intergenerational report.

He might have added the commitment of more troops to Iraq, about to be announced after going to Tuesday's party meeting, and the lancing (after earlier failed attempts) of the Medicare co-payment boil.

The revised Medicare plan prepared for cabinet by new Health Minister Sussan Ley was understood to drop the \$5 cut in the Medicare patient rebate, reduce the length of the freeze on the rebate (having it end July next year rather than in 2018), and scrap the \$5 co-payment. But in place of the co-payment the government was looking at the Medicare schedule to see where it could send a price signal.

With the [Fairfax/Ipsos poll](#) giving him a buffer for the moment and the leadership moves against him at an impasse, Abbott is stepping up the approach he's adopted after his “near death experience” of the February spill motion that was defeated by only a modest margin.

This involves a cascade of announcements, to send positive messages to the public, and considerable internal consultation with MPs, to convince backbenchers that he should be given adequate time to repair.

The strategy also includes dashes around the country when he's not in Canberra for Parliament. It's about being seen to do a lot, listen a lot. His hope is this will push up the polls and keep the backbench in the tent.

The result is to reinforce the image of modern politics as a permanent election campaign, with announcements and re- announcements piling out on top of each other, and trash being dumped.

Last week the line from those wanting a leadership change was that the backbench felt the task was now up to the ministers. But they aren't taking it up at the moment.

Trade Minister Andrew Robb on Monday declared the dissidents should "pull their heads in" and, in the absence of much alternative, that's what they are doing for now. "We are at the mercy of events," said one.

That's true for all the players – Abbott and those with aspirations. Abbott's fortunes from now on will swing from poll to poll. While the latest Fairfax poll is helping him, future bad polls will have the opposite effect, throwing him off balance. It's no way for a Prime Minister to have to live, as Julia Gillard can tell him.

A big question is what impact this poll-to-poll, event-to-event existence will have on the formulation of the May budget. Last year the crazy brave budget message seemed to be "to hell with the polls". This year the polls will be well to the fore in Abbott's thinking during budget discussions.

And there is a contradiction here. Thursday's Intergenerational Report is all about the long term, which should mean making hard choices. But there is no way that Abbott - as he indicated some time ago - will allow too many tough decisions. Notably he said on Monday that while the

IGR “shows the scale of the budget problem it also shows the extent of the progress we’ve already made”.

Assuming he is still leader by then, Abbott needs a budget that does not push down the polls or upset the Senate too much.

Which brings us to Clive Palmer. Just to rattle the government’s cage, Palmer announced on Monday that the two PUP senators would not vote on any legislation until the government “chaos” ended.

“The government’s proposals seem to change daily. The policies are not consistent, party in-fighting and conflict is ongoing and as a result our party has decided as a bloc in the Senate to abstain from voting on any legislation proposals.”

Palmer, just to stir a bit more, also pointed to the Liberals' internal argument over financial transparency and accountability that will be before Friday’s federal executive meeting.

“For the Palmer United Party to vote on any proposals, the chaos needs to be resolved or we will abstain until the next election,” Palmer said.

Just what throwing this small grenade will mean for the government’s program is unclear. Especially as, after Palmer’s mid-morning statement, his senators in the afternoon voted to oppose the legislation dealing with union governance.

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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