



Gillard's slippery act may backfire



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He really is the backbone to everything I do

JESSICA MAUBOY
The Darwin singer tells us how she feels about her dad Ferdy who recently suffered serious burns when a high-voltage cable was severed at his workplace



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I'd like to see euthanasia not being overturned this time, also brothels to be legalised, also a train line would be great, going from here to Palmerston, so of course not everything is about sex

SERANNA SHUTT
The Australian Sex Party Member talks about the party's aims at their launch



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There seems to be a pattern here where the Planning Department is allowing urban development to encroach into buffers around smelly sewage ponds or tips

STUART BLANCH
The Environment NT spokesman comments on the NT Government's plans to build houses beside the tip in Darwin



New Speaker Peter Slipper during Question Time in the House of Representatives

THE ghost of Mal Colston is wandering the corridors of Parliament and some Labor people with long memories fear the worst.

When Colston ratted on the Labor Party in return for the post of deputy Senate president 15 years ago, which gave John Howard a Senate majority on crucial issues, it ended in tears.

Will the same thing come from Julia Gillard's decision to tighten her grip on power by making Queensland Liberal Peter Slipper Speaker of the House?

That might depend on whether the Coalition can find some rodent exterminators as skilled and ruthless as John Faulkner and Robert Ray were in pursuit of the turncoat they dubbed "the quisling Quasimodo from Queensland".

By the time the two Labor senators had finished with Colston he was a shattered man, his reputation shredded. In the process he became an embarrassment for Howard and had to be disowned.

Tony Abbott no doubt had the Colston affair in mind when he said of Slipper on Thursday night: "He's not my man. He's the Prime Minister's man now. She's the one who has to defend him."

For the time being, though, the elevation of Slipper to replace the respected



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Harry Jenkins is seen as a slightly grubby — but clever — political coup.

When Abbott learnt about it, he invented a new parliamentary convention.

"Under a Westminster system it is the responsibility of the Government to provide the Speaker of the Parliament," he said. "And a government which cannot provide the Speaker should no longer expect to remain in office."

Nonsense, of course. The British House of Commons happily elects Speakers from the non-governing party. State parliaments have had independents as Speakers.

But the best example in the current context is Walter Maxwell Nairn, Speaker from 1940-43, which included the period of Australia's last minority government.

Nairn was a member of

the United Australia Party, forerunner of the Liberals.

When the party lost its majority in 1941 and John Curtin formed a Labor government with the support of two independents, Nairn stayed on in the Speaker's chair. That greatly eased Curtin's situation, just as Slipper's defection on Thursday greatly eased Gillard's.

It is easy to understand, though, why Abbott ignored this precedent when Labor dangled the speakership in front of Slipper and the man known to critics as Slippery Pete grabbed it.

As a Liberal apparatchik put it: "What Gillard needs most is time. Now she's got it."

Abbott's central strategy, facing a government with an effective majority of just one on the floor of the House, has been to try to force an

election or by-election. The theory was that, if the Opposition applied enough pressure and did not let up, something would give and Gillard would lose her slender hold on power.

But now, thanks to Slipper, Gillard has a three-vote cushion. Her Government could survive a by-election defeat or a change of mind by one of the independents supporting her.

And Abbott has to contemplate the near-certainty that the Parliament will go its full term.

That gives Gillard a chance to try to build respect, notch up some achievements and claw back support. It means the air of crisis around her government should be less constant. It increases pressure on Abbott to rethink his approach of aggression and populism first and second and policy a distant third.

He will need to adopt a longer-term view.

It also weakens Abbott's excuse — "there could be an election at any time" — for not consulting his shadow cabinet and party room more and not bringing new talent on to the front bench.

While time is Gillard's friend, it is Abbott's enemy. By late 2013, when the next election is due, Abbott will have been Opposition Leader for four years.

He will be sobered by the thought that the last per-

son to serve as opposition leader for that long and lead his party to victory was Gough Whitlam nearly 40 years ago.

Opposition leaders who succeed tend to do it while they are fresh.

So Slipper, despite being an undistinguished politician in anyone's language, has significantly changed the political landscape.

Labor should be concerned, though, that he might change it again, if the Coalition can do to him what Faulkner and Ray did to Colston.

They chased him relentlessly over travel rorts and other abuses and did it so effectively that he faced 28 charges of fraud.

An embarrassed Howard, in the end, had to refuse to accept Colston's vote in the Senate.

Slipper has made headlines over lavish travel expenses, misuse of his government-provided vehicle, whopping mobile phone bills and alleged drunken behaviour.

Within hours of him taking the Speaker's chair, LNP sources in Queensland were winking and nudging about more to come.

The Coalition has declared open season on Slipper. And if they do to him what Faulkner and Ray did to Colston, Gillard and her government will not be able to avoid collateral damage.