Basic lessons in maths and logic

As Machiavelli and more than a few in the Gillard cabinet could attest, many are the ways to get ahead in public life.

Obsequiousness to one’s leader on policy decisions is said to help enormously – especially in a minority government that’s committed to delivering a surplus, no matter how meaningless, in election year.

Cut to the Labor and Liberal leaders just about any night on the TV news and you’ll see a backbench MP and probably a minor senator in the background, nodding enthusiastic agreement to whatever his/her leaders say.


Unquestioning agreement.

Bill Shorten, though never much of a sportsman at the old school, not too long ago elevated furious political agreement with one’s leader to an Olympic level.

Remember? Bill said of Julia Gillard: “I haven’t seen what she said but let me say, I support what it is that she said. I support what she said. My view is what the Prime Minister’s view is.”

The bloke who’s been talked of as a PM since he shifted to long trousers was being ironic.

Surely? Uhhm.

Oh, well. It did get him noticed around the world, if not for the right reason. The Huffington Post loved it. But it later ran a correction: “A previous version of this article incorrectly referred to Bill Shorten as Bob Shorten.”

“Aw, soz dude,” as my 14-year-old would say.

Bob, Bill. What’s the diff? So long as he supports the PM.

Which brings me to Kelvin Thomson – the Labor member for Bob Hawke’s old seat of Wills in Melbourne. Thomson made a good call this week after the Treasurer, Wayne Swan, outlined public spending cuts to offset the economic slow-down that threatens the all-important $1.1 billion surplus, as part of the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook, or MYEFO (kids, make sure you’ve got the filter on or a parent around when you type that into your search engines).

Among revenue measures was a cut to the “Baby Bonus” from $5000 to $3000 for second children. The bonus is means-tested to the (still generous) family income threshold of $850,000 a year. Cutting the bonus for second children (the government is still figuring out how to define “second child”; think about it) will save $451 million in three years.

Thomson said: “I think there are better ways of spending public money.” He nominated tertiary education in the certain knowledge it won’t do his career much good while Gillard is PM and to cries of “Touche Kelvin” from the comrades. Well, not cries, exactly – for the PM’s re-educators are quick to stifle public dissent these days. But plenty of tacit agreement from the backbench to the cabinet.

Which ought to resonate with Prime Minister Gillard, who has cast herself as the “Education” PM. But no – not this MYEFO, which cut $500 million from research funding at universities in four years, $82 million in income support to some undergraduate students in four years and another $167 million for some master’s students.

And she calls herself the education prime minister,” sneered a senior colleague, who, like many in caucus, believes Labor needs to re-evaluate its core welfare objectives. They should start with the ridiculous non-means-tested Child Care Rebate – a lingering Howard government sop to wealthy families who can afford to pay 100 per cent of childcare costs.

Means-testing the rebate, which compensates families for 50 per cent of their total childcare costs, to a family income threshold of $139,000 would save about $2 billion in four years. That’s a lot of public hospital beds, support for bright, underprivileged students, and a lot of teeth for kids whose parents can’t pay the dentist.

What about means-testing it to $85,000 or $50,000?

Meanwhile, should the government also give you $5000 to meet the costs of the pram, the nappy service and the cot? And then $3000 for the second child?

“Vicious and savage” is how the manager of opposition business, Christopher Pyne, labelled the Baby Bonus cut. Try “generous” and “wholly unnecessary”.

As independent MP Tony Windsor pointed out, there are better ways for governments to support needy parents.

So what is the social responsibility of a government? What of the 2.2 million citizens who live below the poverty line? They include 600,000 children, many of whom go to school without breakfast or lunch.

Priorities! Good governments advance them through genuinely tough decisions.

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