

Tony Abbott proves he really has people skills

Not long ago, the words "people skills" were used about Tony Abbott mockingly, especially among journalists and political commentators. Abbott claimed to possess people skills when he thought about running for the Liberal Party leadership after the Coalition's defeat in 2007. Few took the description seriously and it was soon used by Abbott's critics to highlight a lack of self-awareness.

der Abbott's leadership, is competitive. This was not the case under Brendan Nelson and Malcolm Turnbull.

The Coalition's support has increased gradually since Abbott replaced Turnbull. The trend is evident in the poll. The Coalition's primary vote was at 35 per cent during the final week of Turnbull's leadership. It rose to 38 per cent just after Abbott became leader, and at the end of February, it was 41 per cent.

Unlike Howard and Costello, Abbott was never in the forefront of the debate on the need for economic reform in Australia. Even so, the poll indicates the Coalition leads Labor by 51 per cent to 41 per cent when electors are asked

which party is best suited to handle the economy. The gap is much the same when interest rates are raised.

It is fashionable among some to blame the Rudd government's difficulties on the Prime Minister's communications ability, or lack thereof. This is somewhat unfair to both Rudd and Abbott. Not even such fine communicators as Margaret Thatcher or Bill Clinton could have explained the home insulation policy for the simple reason it was an easily rorted dud.

Few would doubt Barack Obama's ability to get across a message. Yet he has had no more success convincing Americans of the need for a cap-and-trade approach to carbon emissions than Rudd has had in Australia.

Most reports of Niki Savva's book, *So Greek: The Confessions of a Conservative Leftie*, have focused on the former journalist's account of her time working for Costello and Howard during the period of the Coalition government and its leadership tension.

Laurie Oakes launched it last month. He spoke about the interaction between journalists and politicians in Canberra and had some useful insights into what should be the relationship between former political staffers and their one-time bosses.

But Oakes, like many of his colleagues, ignored one of the central messages of *So Greek*. When Savva arrived at the press gallery in the early 1970s, "the overwhelming majority of gallery journalists were Labor supporters" - as she was at the time. According to Savva, not much has changed since, except "the Greens have peeled some Labor sympathisers". She writes: "In the gallery itself conservatives are few, and often reluctant to out themselves."

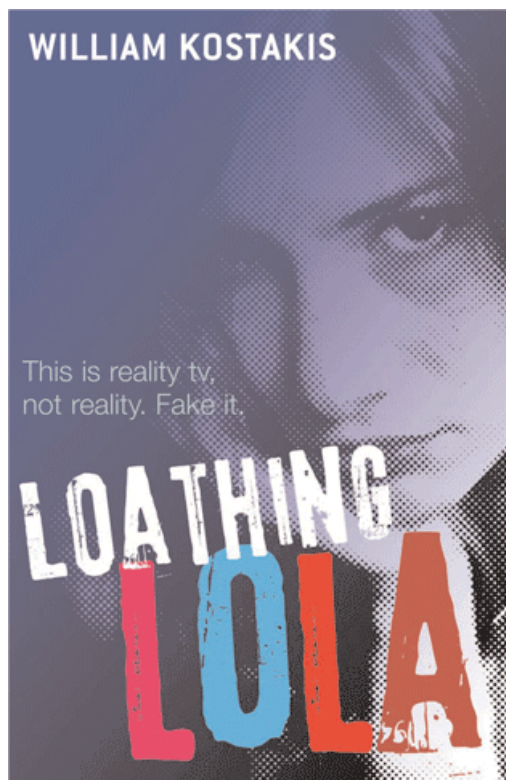
There is little doubt Abbott's social conservatism is unpopular among large sections of the press gallery. But this does not mean he is unpopular in the suburbs and the regional cities, among either women or men. The Prime Minister, also a social conservative, understands this. Rudd has a high popularity rating. It's possible he can rally Labor on such issues as health and industrial relations, where it has a large lead. But health reform can be as difficult to explain to the electorate as emissions trading - as Obama found out.

Then there is industrial relations. As the Minister for Resources, Martin Ferguson, warned last week, flexibility and productivity are the key to ensuring the continuing mining boom does not have deleterious effects on the rest of the economy due to wage pressures. The government has junked workplace agreements, at the core of labour market flexibility.

It's unclear how the year will work out. But Rudd's decision to cancel an important trip to the US indicates he acknowledges Abbott really does have some people skills.

Gerard Henderson is executive director of The Sydney Institute.

Article from the Sydney Morning Herald



William Kostakis (author)

William Kostakis (born June 2, 1989) is a Sydney-based Australian author and was the Sydney Morning Herald Young Writer of the Year in 2005.

His first novel for young adults, *Loathing Lola*, was released in August 2008 through Pan Macmillan. In 2005, Kostakis won the Sydney Morning Herald Young Writer of the Year for a story called *Bing Me*.

One of his three winning short stories from 2005, *Bing Me*, was published in the Sydney Morning Herald 'Spectrum' section. In it, this guy has an Internet relationship. Kostakis insists it isn't about him, but that doesn't stop us from silently judging him.

Bing Me can be read here. Kostakis scored his first publishing contract at 17, while still completing his final year of high school, Newington College. He began work on a variant of *Loathing Lola* when he was 11 years old, and has since been refining it.

The novel has been a critical success, dubbed a "kickass debut", "a smart, sharp tale about fame, love and loss" by Australian *DOLLY Magazine*, "brilliant" by *The Examiner*, "a promising debut from a young and talented Australian writer" by Danielle Trabsky at *Australian Book Review*, "polished" and "extremely funny" by Mike Shuttleworth at the State Library of Victoria, "highly entertaining" by Angela Meyer at *LiteraryMinded*, "a witty tale of trust, teenage friendship, school politics, family relationships and teenage love that is propelled by regular humour, satirical characters and loads of drama... a popular addition to the mid-teen

market" by Allison Paterson at *Magpies Magazine*, and rated four stars by Anastasia Gonis at *Good Reading Magazine*, who said, "The story sparkles through the humorous dialogue of a cast of cleverly chosen characters".



Yet the latest Herald/Nielsen poll, published yesterday, suggests Abbott does have people skills. The statistics tell their own story. As at last weekend, Abbott had an approval rating of 50 per cent with 41 per cent disapproving. This is quite high for an opposition leader.

Moreover, the Coalition and Labor are equal in the primary vote, with Labor leading by 53 per cent to 47 per cent after preferences. This equates with Kevin Rudd's winning margin over John Howard in 2007. It is customary for the gap between the parties to narrow close to an election.

Rudd Labor is favourite to win the coming election. But the Coalition, un-

So Greek confessions of a conservative leftie Niki Savva

'A rivetting insider's account of how politicians, minders, and journalists really operate.'

Laurie Oakes'

Intelligent, well-written and incredibly knowledgeable.'

Ian Nichols (West Australian)'

[An] excellent memoir ... Savva's book is a compelling and convincing account of her extended Cypriot family's success in this country ... This book is gratifying reading for all who have an interest in how the nation is really governed and how politics actually plays out. Savva writes in an engaging and conversational style.'

Stephen Loosley (The Spectator)

From one of the most senior correspondents in the Canberra Press Gallery comes a rare account of life as a political insider.

Born in a small village in Cyprus, Niki Savva spent her childhood in Melbourne's working-class suburbs -- frontiers where locals were suspicious of olive oil, and Greek kids spoke Gringlish to their parents.

Only a few decades later, despite all the challenges of being a migrant woman in Australia, Savva had risen through the ranks of political journalism at *The Australian*, and had gone on to head the Canberra bureaus of both the *Melbourne Herald Sun* and *The Age*.

Then in 1997, family tragedy struck, and she was forced to reassess her career. In spite of her own Labor convictions, she became Liberal treasurer Peter Costello's press secretary, a role that she kept for six years before moving on to join John Howard's staff.

This is one of the few books about Australian political life written by an insider with decades of exposure to its major players. Hilarious, moving, and endlessly fascinating, Savva's is a story that moves between countries, cultures, careers and, ultimately, political convictions.

'So Greek is ... often funny, always opinionated ... and [about] the power play and shenanigans of Australia's political media ... This is a great book for students of politics and the media, and for lovers of scuttlebutt everywhere.'

(Bookseller & Publisher)

