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Dutton and the Coalition did not do the work, and misread the Australian mood

Mark Kenny : 8-10 minutes

The former federal director of the Liberal Party, Brian Loughnane, used to tell media companies that their practice of commissioning expensive opinion polls right through a parliamentary term was a waste of money.

Election 2025 seemed to vindicate his charge. For example, polls conducted within sight of the election – since about February this year – returned markedly different results from those that had been breathlessly reported through 2024.

A rigorous strategist, Loughnane had reasoned that the central polling task of establishing “who you would vote for were an election held this Saturday” prompts a meaningful answer only when an election is actually about to occur. Midway through a term, voters simply see the question as a hypothetical exercise limited to assessing the incumbent government’s performance.

Come the campaign, though, considerations shift to stereo. Inexorably, voters’ attention expands to include the would-be government: the opposition. What are its solutions? Is it really ready for office? And perhaps most crucially, who is its leader, this person insisting on becoming prime minister?

This electoral reckoning – a turning point from the abstract to the applied – is where Peter Dutton’s three-year strategy started to come unstitched.

The conservative Queenslander had risen in the polls through 2024, buoyed by his surprisingly effective dismantling of the Voice in the 2023. He had been lifted further by the Albanese government’s handling the cost-of-living crisis. Dutton’s team was uncommonly unified, his focus laser-like on Labor’s shortcomings.

As 2025 approached, Dutton looked to be in a strong position, drawing encouragement from the success of populist right-wing parties across the democratic world. These victories suggested Dutton had a winning formula – a pitch consistent with the populist-nationalist zeitgeist.

The biggest of these international success stories, the barnstorming election of US President Donald Trump in November 2024, lifted right-wing spirits into the stratosphere.



The election of Donald Trump in November 2024 buoyed the spirits of conservatives around the world. Cristobal Herrera-Ulashkevich/EPA/AAP

Trump's defiant return was a frontal repudiation of liberal elites and their priorities around climate change, procedural governance, feminism and other identity-based politics.

To Dutton, this new, brash and disruptive electoral mood felt propitious. He faced a uncharismatic opponent, widely perceived as weak, during a cost-of-living crunch. Voters were angry at the government. The opposition leader had the wind at his back. He told his colleagues he would win. Albanese was "weak, woke, and sending you broke".

More explicitly, he praised Trump as "shrewd" and a "big thinker", and when tariffs were placed on Australian imports to the US, Dutton hinted he would have secured exemptions because of his ideological like-mindedness with the president.

Actions followed.

Within days of Trump's headline-grabbing appointment of Elon Musk to lead a department of government efficiency, Dutton followed suit, promoting the Indigenous hero of the anti-Voice campaign, Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa-Price, to his shadow cabinet in charge of government efficiency.



Peter Dutton appointed Jacinta Nampijinpa-Price to head up its Trump-like government efficiency portfolio. Mick Tsikas/AAP

He would go on to announce a consciously Trumpian-sounding plan to slash Australia's public service jobs by 41,000, and another policy to end work-from-home arrangements. The latter proved so disastrous he was forced into an embarrassing backdown on it.

Fuelling his growing ebullience, Dutton unwisely favoured soft-ball interviews with conservative backers on Sky News and talkback radio. Where orthodox media interviews might have sharpened his communication skills and also alerted him to holes or excesses in his suite of policies, Dutton received pats on the back and encouragement to go harder.

This meant he came away even more convinced that the times were suiting him, and that the prize of unseating a first-term government for the first time since the Great Depression was within reach.

By the time the pace lifted and the scrutiny intensified as the election campaign neared, the weaknesses in Dutton's campaign were structural and impossible to hide.

Trump had trashed the global trading system. He insulted America's closest and most dutiful friends, Australia included.

Polls showed that Australians saw Trump as a threat. Dutton had backed the wrong horse.

A preoccupation with attacking the Albanese government rather than undertaking the detailed policy development work needed for government – replete with potentially difficult internal disputes both within the Liberal Party and within the Coalition – had left Dutton with a thin offering to voters.

And an unwillingness to brook these searching introspections also left Dutton with an overly compliant and unimpressive frontbench.

In policy terms, this thinness led to election commitments that had not been adequately stress-tested. Some would draw fire and be abandoned while others would be announced and then de-emphasised, effectively back-officed for the campaign.

On personnel, most shadow ministers were kept out of the national campaign spotlight. This was either because they were consumed with their own electoral survival, were considered by Dutton's office to be incompetent, or simply because there was insufficient policy meat to defend within their allotted area of responsibility.

This meant an ever-greater “presidential” focus on Dutton, even as he became a net drag on the Coalition vote. The Liberal Party's polling must have identified his low standing, yet still the campaign remained unusually focused around him as leader. A stark measure of how crazy-brave this was came on election night when Dutton lost his seat (Dickson). Albanese had made a point of going straight to Dickson as his first move on day one of the campaign, and returned there at the end.

When policy promises were announced, they tended to be late in the campaign, swamped by other events, or lost in public holiday periods (Easter and Anzac Day).

The late-to-very-late release of policy fuelled criticism that Team Dutton was not confident of its own programs and wanted to attract as little attention as possible.

Thus a major \$21 billion increase in defence spending came with scant detail in the penultimate week, sandwiched between public holidays and after early voting had already begun. It attracted little sustained attention.

An otherwise attention-grabbing proposal to legalise the sale of vaping products outside of pharmacies to better regulate its harm and derive billions in revenue, lobbed on Thursday afternoon of the final week. Millions of Australians had already voted. It suggested even Dutton was sheepish about its virtues.

While a public service work-from-home ban was abandoned mid-campaign amid a backlash, public service job cuts, a policy that initially had been regarded as a positive was softened to apply only to Canberra, to exempt front-line service jobs, and to be achieved only through attrition rather than sackings. Its cost savings were thrown into doubt.

It became such a liability that even the Liberals' ACT Senate candidate campaigned against it, putting him in the invidious position of effectively saying, "vote Liberal to give Canberrans better protection from the Liberals".

Dutton's formal campaign was untidy and inept, but it was led by a man intent on bending the electorate to his will rather than building a broader constituency for his party's worldview.

In the end, the campaign asked to do too much after a wasted three years in which hard policy development was shirked, and tough decisions to strengthen an underperforming frontbench were avoided.