



# Taxing times for Abbott and Hockey as parties struggle to make their mark



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Both sides of politics are having trouble getting their messages straight.

THE Opposition is taking its post-budget test – question: is the Coalition a credible alternative? — in two parts. After Tony Abbott’s budget reply on Thursday, shadow treasurer Joe Hockey will be seriously on the rack next Wednesday at his National Press Club address. It is being billed as not just the usual tirade against the budget. Hockey, Abbott has told us, will have more to say about what cuts a Coalition government would make.

This flagging raises expectations and Hockey won’t have an easy task. Spending cuts are fashionable politics in theory, but when you get down to the practice, particularly in opposition, they bring out all the interest groups in defence of their patches.

Abbott’s zoning in on the public service on Thursday was predictable and in the easier category at one level. To be really cynical about it, both seats in the ACT, which would take the brunt of these job cuts (done through attrition) are firmly Labor. But the pledge has also opened up a debate about what these reductions would mean for the functions and services the bureaucrats provide.

Budget week highlighted how both sides of politics are having trouble getting their messages straight – and across to voters. The government has a reasonable story on the proposed resource tax – that the taxpayers are entitled to a greater share of the mineral-boom wealth. The miners’ threats not to go ahead with projects are just that – threats made in the course of applying pressure. On past experience, one has to be sceptical about whether they will turn into any capital strike (yes, they have all those opportunities elsewhere, but some of the alternative countries have political and other disadvantages). The Treasury argument that the changes in the mining tax regime should boost, rather than shrink, the industry is at least as convincing as the claims of the miners’ (and probably more so).

But so far the government is struggling in the war of words over the tax. Kevin Rudd seems to be in a general communications funk, having failed to sell the emissions trading scheme last

year and now finding it difficult to justify that retreat. It remains to be seen whether he can gear himself up on the mining tax.

Of course he’d prefer to be talking health – but the extra \$2.2 billion health spending in the budget (for primary care) got lost in the mining racket. Even the broad health message has been badly sold. When it was trying to get its deal with the states the government put out its initiatives in so many bits that the overall impact was diluted.

The government has the substance but hasn’t been doing that well with the message; the opposition, in contrast, is thin on content although strong on some of the messages it does send.

Abbott’s stock in trade is attack and he has wanted to concentrate on the government’s problems, of which there have been quite a few recently. His difficulty, however, is that in the end negatives are unlikely to shift enough votes. Abbott’s battle continues to be convincing people that he and the Coalition have the goods.

Thursday’s reply didn’t go much beyond easy denunciations and superficial savings, despite Abbott admitting this was a vital speech.

Researcher Annabelle Lukin, from Macquarie University’s Department of Linguistics, who analysed the language in the budget speech and Abbott’s reply, noted: “Abbott was busier attacking the government than making his own announcements. We don’t see any words in his top 20 which clearly signal policy announcements by the Coalition.”

Hockey has something to prove on Wednesday. Treasurer Wayne Swan has received plaudits for both the budget and his handling of the sales pitch. Hockey is an up-and-down media performer, sometimes hitting the wrong note and not looking the part – a shadow treasurer needs to show a bit of gravitas. As an aspiring leader, Hockey has to show sharpness in the economic role; colleagues (always looking to the future) are also on the watch for signs that he would have, at some point, wider potential and appeal. Especially now that Malcolm Turnbull is back for the long haul.