Why politicians can't communicate

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The return of Julia Gillard to public life reminds us of her warmth and enthusiasm for reform. It's a shame modern political machines grind human qualities out of our leaders, writes Ian McAuley

Anne Summers may have planned her gatherings with Julia Gillard as "thank you" or "farewell" sessions, but to me they came across as "welcome back" ceremonies for a well-loved Australian who has been away for three years.

Once again we saw and heard a witty and warm person, passionate about politics, and rightly proud of her achievements. Hers is the best of Australian stories.

But over her three years as Prime Minister, apart from rare moments such as her attack on misogyny, we saw little of that side of Gillard. Her speeches were leaden and boring, coming across as if they had been written by a committee, interspersed with inane references to "working families" and similar platitudes. She seemed like a poorly cast actor.

Gillard loved using schools as backdrops for announcements. Her speeches on these occasions were ghastly, but by contrast her discussions, often with schoolchildren, revealed a true passion for education.

Richard Neustadt, in his biographies of US presidents, shows how these "binary" leader personalities develop. From the day of election the president is surrounded by a court of minders, some who are self-seeking, but most who are well-intentioned. Every public appearance is as carefully managed as a scene in a Spielberg movie. Very few presidents manage to take full control of their own role. So it is with the heads of governments in most democracies, including our own.

Similarly, Rudd speechwriter James Button recently wrote about how every speech passes from portfolio to portfolio, to ensure the policy content is right, before being handed to the political minders, to make sure the most recent focus-group tested clichés are included. All this is to avoid the chance of causing offence or forcing a gaffe.

If the speeches and press releases don't achieve enough political traction, the remedy is clear: run the machine harder to churn out more of them.

A third writer, the Washington-based British journalist Alistair Cooke, related the story of simultaneous but separately prepared speeches by Roosevelt and Churchill shortly after the US had entered the European War. Both had similar content, but while Roosevelt's speech was flat and bureaucratic, Churchill's was uplifting and lively. "How does he do it?" Roosevelt asked his aides. "I'm afraid, Mr President, he rolls his own", came the reply. Churchill gave few speeches, but mostly he rolled his own.

Of course there was more to the Gillard government's communication difficulties than the mechanics of speechwriting. Had they gone into government with a set of policies, supported by consistent principles and underpinned by well understood values, everyone from the prime minister through to the first-term backbenchers could have spoken spontaneously without the need for carefully crafted talking points or clearance through official channels.

There is a lesson here for Labor's policy-making process. If the next Labor leader is saddled with a muddled bunch of policy "positions", some resulting from wins by the "left", others from wins by the "right", he will have the same problems as Gillard experienced. A set of compromise "positions" – a little bit of socialism here, a little bit of capitalism there – was the essence of the insipid "third way" which left the UK electorate puzzled about what Tony Blair's Labour Party stood for.

The next stage of reform for Labor is to use its policy-making processes to articulate principles which can match its progressive values with those of the Australian public. The 5000 people who came to hear Gillard and the 400,000 who watched her on TV reveal plenty of enthusiasm to engage with Labor on principles and values. What they don't want to do is read another press release or to hear another cliché-laden speech.