

The Prime Minister: An authority figure, not a *Big Brother* contestant

By Geoff Aigner

As we embark on yet another round of speculation about who will be our next Prime Minister, it's time to think about what we want in a new leader.

A woman probably won't work – and definitely not one who is confident, intelligent and articulate. Women such as Gillard, Bligh, Chikarovski and Keneally stir up way too much insecurity and vitriol. Let's not take any chances – let's rule women out.

Now for men. Smart and diligent? No that didn't work out too well for Rudd or Keating. Too smart. Too many words. Too much work.

Rugged and high-achieving? No we scoff at Abbott. He's trying too hard. Cycles too much. Rhodes scholar.

A success story? Definitely not. No we don't like Turnbull. Too successful. Made too much money.

So what do we want?

Well if the leader really must be intelligent, hard working and competent, so be it – as long as they do it quietly.

John Howard was good. He was just a suburban solicitor. (He also delivered some of the biggest reforms to immigration and taxation policy in Australian history.)

Bob Hawke did pretty well too. He was the blokey, hard-drinking womaniser. (Don't mention he overhauled the economy. Don't mention the Accords.)

So that's it: that's what we want in a leader.

Someone who undersells their achievements, and who we can have a laugh at or with.

Someone who doesn't make us feel uncomfortable, and who doesn't threaten us.

Someone who won't disturb the large chip we have on our national shoulder about authority figures.

At some point the process for selecting our political leaders has begun to mirror that of voting out (and perhaps, back in) *Big Brother* contestants.

The pressure is on our leaders to not be too smart or diligent – we want them to tackle the big issues, but at the same time be non-threatening and popular.

If they get the balance wrong, they get voted out of the house.

Let me suggest it is our own inability to *authorise* our leaders (particularly if they threaten our egos) that's making it hard for them to make progress on difficult issues.

We as Australians face significant social, environmental and economic challenges – and yet we have removed our leaders' authority to tackle them.

This is not a partisan problem. Whichever person or party is in power faces the same dilemmas.

Tackling the issues requires intelligence, confidence and hard work. More importantly it will mean owning the authority that comes with a leader's position.

That's difficult in Australia. We say we are larrikins, don't take authority seriously and are good at cutting down tall poppies. That's a nice story we tell ourselves.

Unfortunately it sounds quite adolescent. That's because it is.

The vast majority of our leaders are smart, ambitious, hard working and determined, and we need to find it within ourselves to face that reality.

We need to let our leaders lead, and give them authority to make tough decisions.

We need to *want* them to be smart.

We need to be *proud* that they work hard.

Surely we can tolerate leaders who are intelligent, who make tough decisions, and who don't baby us?

It's time to turn the great optimism we have in Australia towards the task and role of leadership.

If we can do that we may be able to become those leaders ourselves. Heaven knows we need good leaders in our homes and communities – not just in Canberra.

Geoff Aigner is a senior manager and teacher at The Benevolent Society's leadership centre, Social Leadership Australia. He also teaches change and leadership in the MBA program at the Australian Graduate School of Management. Geoff's book, *Leadership Beyond Good Intentions*, was published by Allen & Unwin on 1 June.