



Worm turns towards Abbott



TONY Abbott's strong performance in last night's election debate has resurrected his campaign but the worm showed female voters favouring the nation's first female prime minister.

Both leaders tried to stay positive to keep the worm on side with Mr Abbott scoring well when he sold his paid-parental leave scheme and Ms Gillard winning points extolling her record on delivering tax cuts, raising the pension and childcare subsidies.

Discussion about immigration took up a large part of the debate with Ms Gillard unable to guarantee her proposal for a refugee processing centre in East Timor would be delivered in three years. Mr Abbott scored poorly trying to explain how he would keep cost-of-living pressures down by ensuring competition in the market but his promise to get spending and debt under control was welcomed by the worm.

One of Ms Gillard's most difficult moments was explaining why she had decided to depose former PM Kevin Rudd but she won a positive response from the worm when she said Australians would now get a say in the election on whether she should be leader.

Mr Abbott had to explain why

voters should believe he would not re-introduce work choices.

He said he now believed there had been constant changes in industrial relations policies and stability was needed.

"I respect the verdict of the public ... let's give those laws a chance," he said.

Both leaders are long-time sparring partners in the Parliament and in TV debates and they both performed strongly.

While their opening and closing remarks appeared well scripted both were more spontaneous when answering questions from the panel of three journalists asking questions.

Channel 9's "worm" panel gave Ms Gillard an overwhelming win, while Channel 7's also favoured the PM by a closer margin. Sky News's panel mostly gave the nod to Mr Abbott. Ms Gillard used the debate to sell herself as a leader who wanted to build education and health services, arguing that Labor had managed the economy well, and spruiked her success in introducing a school testing regime.

Mr Abbott differentiated himself as a family man who had a real understanding of cost-of-living pressures as he struggled to pay his own mortgage and school fees for his children. He highlighted his record as a min-

ister in the Howard Government who introduced work for the dole and spent money on health. Mr Abbott was rewarded by the worm when he mentioned his paid-parental-leave policy, which is more generous than Labor's.

Ms Gillard scored points explaining how her Government had helped Australians deal with cost-of-living increases by delivering three tax cuts, a \$30-a-week rise in the pension and a 50 per cent increase to the childcare rebate.

The worm also liked it when she explained her sustainable-population policy as one that would protect the Australian way of life, jobs, health, education and open spaces.

Ms Gillard struggled when asked whether she would be able to deal with the influx of boat people.

She refused to give a commitment that her proposed refugee processing centre in East Timor would be up and running within the next three years.

Controversy surrounding sorting of Labor's spending on the school building program and its pink batts scheme which saw houses burned down got a positive response for Mr Abbott.



FOLLOW THE LEADER

■ **Julia Gillard** and Tony Abbott were in Canberra before the debate yesterday.

■ Ms Gillard made more green announcements but they have failed to impress hardliners.

■ **Mr Abbott** announced a Coalition government would cut the annual immigration intake to 170,000 places, compared with a peak of 300,000 two years ago, but Labor has called the policy "a con" because the immigration intake was already on the way down.

■ Greens Leader **Bob Brown** was in Brisbane targeting Queensland voters. He said the Greens were the only party with a credible climate-change plan including a carbon tax that would force polluters to pay \$23 per tonne, which would help save the Great Barrier Reef.



QUOTE OF THE DAY

“ On the issue of marriage I think the reality is there is a cultural, religious, historical view around that which we have to respect.

- Openly gay Minister for Climate Change
 Penny Wong

\$1.64bn

GILLARD:
 Announced \$180 million one-off tax break for companies which invest in measures to cut energy use. Announced \$47 million would be cut from low-emissions technology demonstration fund, set up by the former Howard government.

ABBOTT:
 Announced a \$50 million plan to reinstate a Howard government crime-prevention plan that includes the installation of closed-circuit television cameras.

\$903m

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BEFORE THE BOUT: Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott at the start of the leaders

debate at the National Press Club in Canberra last night

Women voters prove less sceptical

BEN PACKHAM

IF there was a lesson from last night's leaders' debate, it's that women are more prepared to give their political leaders the benefit of the doubt.

Last night, for the first time, there were both male and female worms slithering across TV screens to gauge reactions to a leaders' election debate.

Channel Nine's pink worm, con-

trolled by female uncommitted voters, appeared to like both leaders, especially when they spoke positively about the future.

The blue worm, controlled by men, seemed more sceptical about both of them.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott has long struggled with his perception among women voters as a parliamentary hardman.

But he reined in his trademark aggression and scored highly with

women when he spoke about his plans for a generous paid maternity leave scheme.

Both worms also liked his put-down of Julia Gillard's proposal for a citizen's assembly to chart a course on climate change.

The Prime Minister scored hits – especially with the pink worm – whenever she mentioned WorkChoices and investing in schools and education.



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This was by far the least negative but also the least substantive debate in recent political history. Like the election campaign itself, both leaders conducted themselves as if manipulating the infamous Channel 9 worm was all that counted. Bitter experience has taught politicians that negativity scores badly with the emotional-response meter, so both avoided that tactic. The result was that the debate was a pitiful yawn.

ABBOTT

HITS

- Mr Abbott started nervously but voters will understand that. Though woody and faltering in presentation, he hit all the right marks, contrasting the Opposition's "real action" agenda against what he said was Ms Gillard's and the ALP's tendency to hold reviews and talkfests.
- He probably had his biggest single success with attacks on Ms Gillard's proposed "citizens' assembly" which he described variously as a fudge and a talkfest.
- He did well with the claim that the risk in the election was that a bad government would get a second chance.

MISSES

- On industrial relations, Mr Abbott probably looked his least convincing.
- Also failed to look sincere on climate change.
- His closing statement made some good points but lacked fluency to the point of being almost embarrassing.

GILLARD

HITS

- Ms Gillard also displayed some nerves, which were evident in her voice.
- But as expected, she proved the more polished performer. Unlike Mr Abbott, she rarely needed to read from notes and spoke more assertively.
- Her major hits came with mentions of her strengths drawn from her former role as education and industrial relations minister.
- This she brought to a coherent climax in her closing statement. She emphasised Labor's core beliefs of fairness at work, and support for education, training, health reforms and GP super clinics.

MISSES

- The most significant area of discomfort for Ms Gillard were the questions around how she came to be Prime Minister.
- The issue of how Kevin Rudd was dispatched by Labor's powerbrokers remains a stone in the Labor shoe and Ms Gillard's discomfort was palpable.
- Labor remains vulnerable on its rehashed policy on asylum seekers and on emissions trading, and in both cases Ms Gillard looked unconvincing.