

THE AUSTRALIAN

THE HEART OF THE NATION

Stop bleating about the Senate and start talking

The Rudd government cannot expect automatic support

YOU have to wonder what's happening to politics when five senior ministers line up at a press conference in Canberra to complain about a recalcitrant Senate that won't say yes. Whatever happened to backroom trade-offs and the sweet-talking that governments have long relied upon to get their legislative program through unfriendly upper houses? Where, pray, are the people skills that prime ministers use to convince oppositions or the minor parties or independents to back their bills?

The Rudd government seems more interested in taking the easy road of blaming an obstructionist Senate than walking the hard yards of negotiation with their opponents. Bleating may get them sympathetic coverage from some sections of the Canberra press gallery but the ministers would be better employed having a coffee with Nick Xenophon or Steve Fielding. If they need a blueprint for how it is done, they might care to review the events of 1996 when then minister for workplace relations Peter Reith spent months negotiating his industrial relations changes with the Democrats led by Cheryl Kernot and Andrew Murray, or the tough negotiations over the GST in 1999. Life is not easy when you don't control the Senate, but sulking about it will get you nowhere. The reality is that for 27 of the past 30 years, governments have had to work with the minor parties or independents to get legislation through. The bipartisan support for the

Hawke-Keating reforms of the 1980s was the exception: the Howard government faced extraordinary obstruction in the Senate till it gained control in 2005.

The government blames the opposition for blocking two proposals in particular, changes to the 30 per cent rebate for private health insurance premiums; and the emissions trading scheme. Yet an objective analysis suggests senators did the right thing. Before the 2007 election, the Prime Minister pledged the rebate would not be touched. Can the Senate be blamed for maintaining faith with the public and protecting the rebate? The pragmatic truth about the ETS, which this newspaper backed, is that Australia is better off not having a cap-and-trade system ahead of most of the world.

Yesterday the Prime Minister was accusing Mr Abbott of blocking his plans on parental leave and hospitals — even though there is no legislation on either. He should stop carping. For a start, the numbers in the upper house mean Labor does not need a single Coalition vote to get its program up.

Labor's attack on the Senate is an insult to voters who decided the numbers. No one condones a blanket rejection of legislation but refusing to be a rubber stamp is a vital role for the Senate and an important check on political excess. But if he genuinely feels the Senate is unworkable, Mr Rudd has the double-dissolution triggers to make us vote again.