

I watched a political show so comical it was a tragedy

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By Piers Akerman —, Saturday, February, 09, 2013

POLITICAL channel surfers had the option of watching three competing programs last week – the latest from the Obeid Family Files, Julia's Disintegrating Party and a new show, Australia's Dopest Sports Stars.

The Obeid Family Files won the award for the week's most extraordinary script. This family troupe has exceeded all expectations with its surprising accounts of millions of dollars allowing them to purchase prime Sydney real estate.

Perhaps Jesus is responsible for the paperwork, as one junior Obeid has suggested to the Independent Commission Against Corruption – or maybe it was the Tooth Fairy, as counsel assisting the inquiry has facetiously implied.

Compelling viewing, with props including handwritten notes detailing the millions of dollars the players might have expected as their cut from the sale of the disputed coal-mining leases.

The competition from Canberra was strong though, with the first sittings of the parliamentary year providing viewers an opportunity to see how the new-look Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her reshuffled frontbench would approach the long-running election campaign.

After an initially dignified start, the show descended into the same old screeching chorus of transparently false claims, which destroyed any veneer of gravitas.

The program now has such a huge cast and so many competing threads of narrative that it could give rise to a host of new series.

These run from the underlying carbon tax lie – which throbs almost subliminally like the Jaws music – to the lurking would-be usurper Kevin Rudd, seeking restoration to power, to the sub-plots involving Craig Thomson and Peter Slipper. There are even recurring historical appearances by former Gillard boyfriend and AWU union secretary Bruce Wilson and his associate Ralph Blewitt, who were key participants in creating the AWU Workplace Reform Association which Gillard advised on and later described as a “slush fund”. Both Wilson and Blewitt have denied they benefited from the fund.

While real characters appeared in the Obeid Family and Julia’s Disintegrating Party, stars of the new sports-based show have yet to be revealed.

Writers for the Dopest Sports must name some key players if the series is to build on initial ratings.

Few viewers could resist a show which began with the boast of “the blackest day in Aussie sport”, but without some substance to support the claims, interest could fall rapidly.

Scriptwriters include the Australian Crime Commission, the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority and the Therapeutic Goods Administration. The focus is on the AFL and NRL but main cast members remain shadowy.

As compelling as these programs are, there is the suggestion that the sports show has been rushed to air as a spoiler to woo viewers from the very successful Canberra saga.

Whilst the scriptwriters for Julia’s Disintegrating Party appear to have already experimented with every possible new idea, they do manage to keep refreshing the show with material that pulls new audiences.

Introducing lines which created uncertainty about the security of superannuation savings ensured that a new demographic will remain tuned even as other segments of the audience turn to other shows.

As with all good scriptwriting, the key is to introduce themes that resonate with target audiences – and few themes are as powerful as concern about personal financial security.

As Tony Shepherd, the president of the Business Council of Australia, said in

discussing Labor's threats to target superannuation: "The money is ours. We go to work, we get paid. The money is ours. It's up to government to justify how much they take from us. It's not their's, it's our money."

The Obeid Family story will continue to fascinate viewers because it provides an extraordinary insight into the day-to-day workings of a NSW family which is alleged to have thoroughly exploited its access to power through its patriarch, veteran NSW Labor politician Eddie Obeid. It will outrate Sylvania Waters.

Julia's Disintegrating Party has echoes of the provincial scandal theme that played through the hit film Muriel's Wedding, but Canberra surpasses Porpoise Spit for diversity of characters and plot intricacies.

Should viewer interest flag, look for an episode featuring Julia's wedding, but only if the Queensland tearaway feels there is sufficient instability within the party to make his move.

Scriptwriters for the Dopest Sports will reveal more about the structure of Project Apero, the taskforce the series is based on, and begin detailing relationships between professional athletes and organised crime in upcoming episodes.

There may even be an opportunity for cross-promotion of Julia's Party and the Dopest Sports as more attention is given to the suspicious betting patterns which emerged as bets were placed on the most likely date of the federal election – after a handful of Labor insiders and independents had been briefed on the September 14 poll.

Interestingly, all three commercial networks will take the raw material for the shows, editing them in-house.

SBS is not expected to air the full series, having committed to a new series titled Finding Australia, Navigation Tips For Non-English Speakers With A Fear of Flying.

The taxpayer-funded ABC, which was given a further \$10 million to add to its billion-dollar budget on Thursday, is working on Julia, the Antipodean Joan Of Arc, the story of a migrant Welsh coal miner's daughter who champions the fight against misogyny while seeking true love after a series of unhappy

relationships. It is not expected to be a ratings winner.



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