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EXECUTIVE EDUCATION 29⁺

Program that 'tops the MBA'

Joanna Mather

Rod Douglas is singing the praises of an alternative to the much-vaunted MBA and reckons the recently departed prime minister could have avoided such a spectacular fall from grace had he followed a similar path.

Douglas, a Queensland businessman and vice-president of the national environmental charity Greening Australia, is an MBA holder himself. But he describes his more recent experience, called Queensland Leadership, as the "best postgraduate program I've ever attended".

And he thinks Kevin Rudd would have learned a lot, not least about the type of leadership required to bring about massive cultural change.

Queensland Leadership is an extension of Sydney Leadership, established by the non-profit, non-religious Benevolent Society in 1999.

The Queensland version was offered for the first time late last year and Douglas is among the first 24 students.

The year-long course focuses on leadership for social and environmental change and at its heart is the theory of "adaptive leadership".

"We talk about either technical or adaptive leadership," Douglas says.

"Adaptive leadership is about dealing with large problems where there is no known solution and about issues where constituents need to change their values and beliefs."

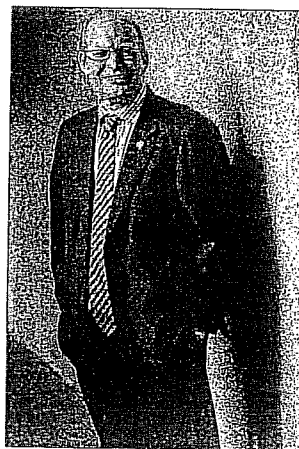
Rudd's scuttled emissions trading scheme is the perfect example of how not to carry out adaptive leadership, Douglas says.

But don't go ditching your MBA application forms just yet. If it's a technical bent you're after, go with an MBA, he says.

The adaptive leadership model was developed by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Harvard is, of course, also celebrated for its MBA teaching.

"I got enormous value out of [my MBA] but I felt this was a much deeper learning style. It was more about process than theory," Douglas says.

For example, the \$16,000 program involves monthly field days which take place in various communities and organisations. These "open classroom" experiences are meant to bring students face to face with real-



Praise ... Rod Douglas. PHOTO: GLENN HUNT

life social problems. "We don't think traditional classrooms will cut it so we take people into central Australia, we take people into prisons and schools," says Robbie Macpherson, who heads Social Leadership Australia, the Benevolent Society's leadership development and consultancy arm.

The former prime minister is also on Macpherson's mind as he talks about the type of leadership he thinks Australia needs.

People at the top don't have all the answers, he says. "Our own prime minister discovered that," he says.

"It doesn't matter how smart you are, no one can have control over all of the issues. The answer is collective responsibility and finding a way forward collectively."

Both the Sydney and Queensland programs feature a mix of students from corporate, government and non-profit backgrounds.

Douglas, founder and director of Gold Coast-based information technology consultancy Successsystems and a fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, did the course in his role as vice-president of Greening Australia.

"There's no doubt not-for-profit is the most complex leadership environment I've ever encountered," he says. "The reason is because negotiations are not simple and clear; it's not just about making money."