

CAMPAIGN TACTICS, MEDIA BIAS AND THE POLITICS OF EXPLANATIONS ACCOUNTING FOR THE COALITION'S LOSS IN 2007

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Abstract

Explanations of election outcomes are never politically neutral because they involve the allocation of credit and blame and have implications for future fortunes. They pose particularly acute problems for supporters of the losing party who typically must both accept the result and find ways to explain the unwelcome outcome without disowning key platforms or alienating parts of its own constituency. The other part of the public political explanation industry—the journalists and political commentariat—has its own biases, and these tend to focus on human error and tactical problems, and to impose retrospectively simple interpretive narratives.

One common explanatory ploy for the losing side is to blame media bias, although this was not a prominent theme in 2007. Indeed the most manifest bias in that election campaign was by News Limited papers,¹ and it was pro the Coalition. Another common explanatory theme is the importance of tactical campaign errors. While, as is inevitable in the intensity and heightened conflict of an election, there were several tactical gaffes and mishaps by both sides, these do not explain the result. The campaign was instead notable for the way the strategic baggage the Liberals carried became crystallised in several newsworthy events during the campaign. If anything, the media treated these with excessive kindness, but their cumulative impact added to the Coalition's woes. To put it colloquially, it was the cards they were playing rather than the way they played them that accounted for the Coalition's defeat.

Keywords Media, elections, Australian politics, explanation, journalism, election campaigning

Introduction

Two weeks after the election, on ABC TV's *Lateline* programme, Virginia Trioli asked lobbyist and former Howard chief of staff Grahame Morris the reasons for the government's defeat, to which he replied:

Look, I think what actually happened is that the Government was so busy governing it forgot the other thing it had to do and that was play politics.

Morris went on to say:

I don't think the Government painted the Opposition and Kevin Rudd and his team as a risk and that was their political job (*Late-line* 7 December 2007).

Morris must have been observing developments through glasses of the rosier possible hue not to have seen the relentless barrage of negative campaigning by the Government against Rudd and Labor in the previous twelve months. However, despite its lack of credibility, Morris's explanation is a specimen of a very interesting political species—politically acceptable explanations by the losing side for their election defeat.

Explaining election results is never politically neutral.² Explanations inevitably involve the allocation of credit and blame. This is, of course, easier for the victors, because for them good has triumphed, the result has confirmed the wisdom of the people, and there is normally room for everyone to share the praise—although jealousies can flare, as after Paul Keating's 1993 triumph when he thought others were taking too much credit.

Because elections represent the epitome of democratic legitimation, the will of the people, the problem for the losing side is to account for the result while also accepting its legitimacy.³ Occasionally, you get fierce partisans for one side who will explain it in terms of the people's stupidity or the public's failure. ABC Radio's *AM* programme relayed one distraught woman at the Liberal Party's election night gathering crying:

I don't want to be an Australian after today. I hate Australia, for Christ's sake I hate us. I think we're despicable...I love this man. This man has given us more than anything, and I just hate to think what we've done to him. I hate Australia. I'm not Australian... (*AM* 25 November 2007).

But for mainstream politicians and media such criticism of the public is not normally a good strategy.⁴ Nor is it one likely to lead to a greater probability of success next time. So, the conundrum is to explain the election loss without at the same time conceding that the other side was more worthy, how to explain away the undesirable outcome? One solution is to dump unpopular policy platforms, but this is always politically sensitive. To blame one of their central policy planks—as the Liberals were wrestling with over *WorkChoices* post their 2007 defeat—runs the risk of sharpening internal disunity, letting down the party faithful who believed in you, and offering ammunition to political opponents.

Constructing Acceptable Explanations

There is a repertoire of explanations which at the same time seek to account for the defeat while not conceding the superior moral or policy credentials of the winning side:

1. We were too noble.
2. The odds were against us—the other side had more resources.
3. The odds were against us—the media were biased.
4. Our PR failed (i.e. it was the selling of the message, not the message) and/or their PR was superior and/or deceptive.

The Morris line is an example of the first explanatory ploy, we were too noble to win. We were so busy governing for the good of the people that we forgot to play politics.⁵ Note here that we are dealing with public accounts not personal beliefs, with rhetorical strategies not psychological coping mechanisms. If the latter, 'balance' theories of attitudes, such as cognitive dissonance (Taber 2003, p. 454), would be relevant. It is very unlikely that Morris believes his picture of the innocent *naifs* of the Howard Government, but rather that he is looking for a politically acceptable formula to account for the unpalatable public rejection.

A second acceptable explanation is that 'we were overwhelmed by the other side's superior resources'. This has been used on a few occasions since 24 November 2007. Leading Liberal powerbroker, and former Minister, Nick Minchin, talked about the massive union mobilisation, and Liberal Party Director Brian Loughnane (2007), in his address to the National Press Club, worried about the democratic implications of so many resources coming from a third party. (He did not mention the democratic implications of governments engaging in partisan advertising.)

All of these explanations may sometimes have at least partial validity. For example, in the 1980s both the Bjelke-Petersen and Burke Governments won elections in Queensland and Western Australia respectively, partly because they had such overwhelming resource advantages over the opposition, resource advantages gained through their corruption.

A variant of 'the odds were stacked against us' is that 'the media were biased against us'. This has been used occasionally in Australia but, perhaps because it is unpopular with the media themselves, has usually failed to get much public traction, at least since the 1980s. Defeated Labour leader Neil Kinnock opened his speech after the UK 1992 election by attacking the Tory tabloid press, which had been particularly virulent, the *Sun* of course claiming 'It was the Sun wot won it' (Greenslade 2003).

Australian leaders are rarely so upfront in their public condemnations, and few strong criticisms were made of the media this time, although a few of the ever-reliable conservative commentators such as Christopher Pearson (2007) thought that the 'Fourth Estate let us down'; while Janet Albrechtsen (2007) who found the Government's coming defeat difficult to accept ('Rudd's electoral enchantment is unprecedented'), by implication was critical of the media, claiming that a Labor victory 'will by any historical measure be a great leap into the unknown'—implicitly arguing that the media failed to make it known.

Like the 'superior resources' claim, there is a sometimes a degree of mutual causality here. Just as a party likely to be victorious has a better chance of raising money, so in some ways normal journalistic practices have a tendency to build a bandwagon effect. Annabel Crabb (2007a) posited an electoral Sod's Law: 'If you are already struggling, things will probably get worse'. Reports of favourable polls, the greater strains on the losing side that can lead to internal discord and criticism (Lewis 2007) and perhaps miscalculation, have a self-reinforcing quality.

Rudd was relaxed, buoyant. At times when interviewed on radio, Howard was crabby and carping (Grattan 2007d).

It's still 25 sleeps till the election, but if you're part of the Kevin07 campaign troupe, you could be forgiven for thinking the Labor leader has got it in the bag. Team Rudd is that confident. Compare that with John Howard's campaign, which is disorganised, slow and constantly on edge. The Prime Minister keeps his distance from the travelling media throng, sometimes spending just half an hour each day in public before bunkering down (Rehn 2007).⁶

But this should not be exaggerated: the media are keen for the novelty of a development going the other way, and in stressing the closeness and uncertainty of the contest.

A fourth species—perhaps the most prolific—centres around the respective communications strategies of the opposing parties. 'There was nothing wrong with our message, just that we (or some of our operatives) failed to get it across.' Victory and defeat here become by-products of tactical mishaps and manoeuvres, rather than any inherent differences in merit. A very common variant is to accuse the other side of being deceptive. Labor supporters' resentments of the Howard Government's claims about interest rates in 2004 are a typical example (Latham 2005; Gartrell 2005).

Public explanations of the recent past help to decide the settings for the future. In this sense, public explanations are not just to placate the party faithful, but are also moves in ongoing internal battles, either about who is to prevail in leadership and power or about future strategies. One motive is often to exorcise the past, to argue that whatever the momentary reasons for the unfortunate loss, they are now past, and the party is now again fit to govern. Once Mark Latham had departed as leader, it was convenient for Labor to concentrate all the reasons for its 2004 loss on his personal shortcomings (Crabb 2005).

Quickest out of the blocks in 2007 in arguing that defeat did not mean that there was any need for the Liberals to change extensively was Victorian Liberal Joshua Frydenberg (2007). He quoted a progressive Liberal Chris Puplick who had said after the 1993 loss how the Liberals had to change, but Frydenberg scoffed that, at the following election,

the Coalition got elected with a 40 seat majority, ushering in a Federal reign of eleven and a half years. This overlooks the fact that, by the 1996 election, the Liberals had abandoned all of the most prominent features of their 1993 campaign—the GST ('never ever') and radical changes to industrial relations and Medicare.

In 2007 the simplest explanation of the Coalition's defeat would place the whole focus on John Howard and leadership transition, wedded to a larger 'It's time' explanation, deliberately cast in an anodyne and non-specific form. This was put as early as election night by prominent New South Wales Liberal MP Pru Goward (*AM* 25 November 2007).⁷ The phrase 'It's time' is never unpacked in any elaborated way. At its most domesticated, it implies the public is simply tired of the same old faces and voices, just the way they tire of a sitcom after several series, but without any implication that anyone has anything more serious to worry about.

So far we have been dwelling on the losers' attempts to construct politically acceptable explanations for an election loss. The other major component of the public explanation industry is the media and the political commentariat. In some ways their emphases are exactly the opposite. In particular, their inclination is to sheet personal responsibility as forcefully as possible on to the leaders of the losing side. But in other ways some of their tendencies are prone to fallacies similar to the losers'.

The Biases of Journalism and Election Explanations

All political commentators—journalists, academics, political activists—have a tendency to over-explain election outcomes (Butler 1973). Perhaps because the system is 'winner take all', the key focus is on who wins government, and this is framed in an all or nothing way. Nearly all election results in Australia are in the range of two-party preferred percentages of 53 to 47 (17 of the 25 elections since World War II, including 2007, have been in this range) but, rather than explain how one side got almost as many votes as the other, the sole focus is on the gap.

Related to this is the tendency to treat the electorate as a single entity. Much commentary is based on a presumption that the electorate all respond the same way to the same political stimulus, or at least that the swinging voters do. And so we are told that the Australian public likes or dislikes something when more often that public is divided over the issue.

There is an amusing, if understandable, before and after contrast in journalistic approaches to elections. Before, journalists tend to stress its unpredictability; afterwards they stress its inevitability. Political journalists, like sporting broadcasters, have a commercial reason for exaggerating the uncertainty of the contest. There is also an element of self protec-

tion—a lack of a prediction or a stance of uncertainty is not as damaging professionally as a false prediction.

In 2007, there seemed a greater than usual degree of reluctance to predict the result. Such reticence was also apparent in 1996, when all the indications were clear that Keating would lose but, because of the late recovery in 1993, the press gallery were too timid to forecast the outcome. Similarly, in 2007, some argued that reporters were too timid to call the government's demise (Ricketson 2007).

A peculiarity of the lead up to the 2007 election was that, as Newspoll founder Sol Lebovic (2007b) wrote in the *Australian* days before the election, 'in the past 20 years no party has maintained such a large and consistent lead going into an election'. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Peter Hartcher (2007) put it more graphically—the Government faced 'opinion polls of chilling steadiness and deadly intent'. However, the newspaper, *The Australian*, which commissions the most prominent of the polls, Newspoll, seemed determined to report them in a way that always qualified or undercut their main finding of a clear Labor lead. Indeed, this had become a matter of controversy (Bahnisch 2007), and even of ridicule among the psephological community—'Dennis "Comical Ali" Shanahan continues his Sisyphean task of reinterpreting Newspoll's massive Labor lead as an imminent Howard victory' (MacCormack 2007).

Before the campaign, Lebovic said: 'I tend to think Labor's current lead is soft...I really believe the polls are giving us contradictory evidence at the moment' (*Lateline* 24 September 2007). He then noted that: 'In the last four elections Newspolls have shown that one in four voters say they finally decided in the final week of the campaign. And that includes about 10 per cent or more who said that they decided on election day itself.' This apparent phenomenon of very late deciders is also based on the Australian Electoral Studies post-election surveys, which have found similar proportions saying that they decided their vote very late. These retrospective self-reports became the basis for a new conventional wisdom used to justify the inconclusiveness around the significance of poll results. It should be noted that no polling company has ever discovered the huge movements of opinion in the last days of a campaign that these large proportions of late deciders might imply.

It may be that respondents want to stress how unattached they are to the party they have voted for. Some of this may relate to the word 'decides'—such as when did Howard or Bush decide to go to war in Iraq? They have claimed they decided very late, well after troops had been deployed to the region, for example. In this case lying is the core of the explanation, but there is also a sense that only at the last moment were they irrevocably committed to that course of action. Similarly, these voters may feel inclined to vote one way but only fully confirm it in their

own mind when forced to do so. So they had 'soft' support for one side, but could have changed if something dramatic had prompted them.

Whatever the truth of this, the lead up to the 2007 election produced the remarkable picture of a news organisation investing very heavily in opinion polling, discovering the dramatic story that a change of government was overwhelmingly likely, and in its reporting and commentary continually undercutting the implications of the research it had paid so much for.

Nor should the election eve flurry in the News Limited papers hailing a move back to the Government be overlooked. Gerard McManus and John Ferguson (2007) thought 'both [late] polls suggest that Labor would pick up a swag of seats but not enough to form government in its own right'. *The Daily Telegraph* was even more gung ho. On the same Friday (23 November) that the newspaper editorial endorsed Labor, half of its front page had a picture of Howard, with the caption 'Battered and bruised but our final poll shows Half-Term Howard is...[and then the largest headline] Half a Chance'. This story—best read with the music from *Rocky* playing loudly in the background—said that their Galaxy Poll showed a late swing back, and had the government 'within striking distance'. Its inside report was headlined 'Too close to call: parties pull level' (in fact there was a four point gap), and Malcolm Farr and Simon Benson (2007) imagined how: 'A determined John Howard has wrenched back a swag of supporters from Labor and is poised to confound election forecasts and retain government'. The following day, Farr's (2007c) final comment was that Howard 'is well positioned to retain government'. *The Australian* was more restrained but still determinedly non-committal. Sol Lebovic (2007c) foresaw 'a very tight result that could go either way', while Dennis Shanahan (2007c) thought 'a late voter surge to John Howard has turned the poll into a tight contest', and that while 'Kevin Rudd has the lead John Howard has the momentum'.

The studied pre-election uncertainty contrasts directly with the post-election narrative which is one of simplicity and inevitability. The winning side, of course, is quick to hail its own genius:

As always history will be written by the victors of this election and it will include a fair slice of myth-making. If Labor wins, the air will be full of assessments of Rudd's brilliance and the Labor campaign's strategic genius (Steketee 2007).

Among commentators it is common to say that the losing side waged a poor campaign, and many were quick to say the Liberals did so in 2007. The editor of *Online Opinion*, Graham Young (2007), thought the Liberals 'were their own worst enemy' and talked of their 'strategic and tactical blunders'. The *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent Phillip Coorey (2007b) thought that 'Right now, if these blokes (the Liberals) had a duck, it would drown', while the *Canberra Times*'s Jack Waterford (2007)

judged that 'John Howard and the Liberal Party have run a disastrous election campaign'. Former ALP pollster Rod Cameron thought that: 'The Liberal effort...has been shambolic, unstructured and mostly "off message"' (Harrison 2007). The *Sunday Age* journalist Jason Koutsoukis (2007) judged that: 'Two words sum up the Coalition's campaign: bloody awful. A complete and utter shambles from start to finish...It started with the \$34 billion tax cut, perhaps the greatest flopperoo in campaign history.' And then there was 'loads of unconvincing union-bashing presumably to shore up the base vote, but nothing to say about the future'.

There is a danger of a misleading *post hoc* imposition of consistency upon the preceding events that eliminates the uncertainties and cross currents that existed in the campaign. It certainly underplays the degree to which there are few if any foolproof political moves. For example, in 2004 when Howard won, the way he grabbed the political initiative at the beginning of the campaign was hailed as genius. Howard had been under pressure over whether he lied about children overboard, and immediately after calling the election he went on the attack, declaring the key issue was trust. In 2007 it was a plausible judgement that the Liberals had to be 'fast out of the blocks', because they were a long way behind and had to get a sense of momentum. So they began with an immediate announcement of a very large tax cut, which clearly caught Labor by surprise. Afterwards, however, some pundits saw this early announcement as a great mistake.

While journalists share the explanatory tendencies of other analysts, they also have their own influences, stemming from a mix of commercial and institutional motives and from personal experience. Journalists see the participants up close, and are very much focused on each day's events. This access gives their reporting greater validity, but can lead to an over-emphasis on immediacy, and overly concrete explanations which give too much attention to actions and insufficient attention to the context of actions. With these in mind we can examine the charges that the Liberals waged a poor campaign, first by examining the major tactical gaffes and mishaps.

Election Campaigns and Tactical Gaffes and Mishaps

There is never a shortage of grist for those who want to argue that tactical mishaps were important in affecting the 2007 result: it is normal for there to be a plethora of tactical mishaps in a campaign, and by both sides. To gain some insight into why this is so, consider the campaign problems of then Health Minister Tony Abbott. An effective campaigner in the past, Abbott had several bad moments during the 2007 election, all conveniently outlined in a column by Glenn Milne (2007d) who, however, assured his readers 'I consider Abbott as a friend.'

The first big embarrassment came after Abbott was not at his office to accept a petition from the dying anti-asbestos campaigner Bernie Banton. Banton, whose understanding was that Abbott would be there to take the petition publicly, severely criticised him. Confronted by TV reporters with this news, Abbott returned fire against the widely admired Banton, saying that just because you were terminally ill did not mean you were pure of heart. The following morning Abbott apologised.

That same day Abbott arrived more than half an hour late for his debate with the Labor shadow Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, at the National Press Club. In front of the TV cameras and the assembled press corps, this absence was another major gaffe, nicely exploited by Roxon's offer to do an imitation of him. Then, while the cameras were filming their post-debate handshake, with microphones clearly open, they exchanged unpleasantries, culminating in Abbott swearing at her.

In the second last week of the campaign Abbott made an unwanted return to the campaign limelight when an amateur video caught him at an electorate meeting, telling people that if *WorkChoices* had affected their conditions, they should get another job.

While these first three tactical setbacks all involved damaging television footage, the fourth one, the most substantial in policy terms, did not. According to Milne (2007d), 'Abbott was obviously knocked off balance by John Howard's decision to try to save one marginal Tasmanian seat with the federal-sponsored local community takeover of the Mersey hospital. This directly contradicted Abbott's previous—and very public—support for a national takeover of all state-run hospitals by Canberra.' At a couple of points during the campaign embarrassments arose for Abbott over this Tasmanian foray. After calling the Tasmanian Health Minister the worst in the state's history, he had to apologise again the following day.

At first glance, these Abbott examples all reflect directly on the judgement and capacity of the individual concerned. But at another level they are indicative of the types of situations to which campaigns give rise, situations conducive to such human error.

Two of Abbott's problems stemmed from logistical foul-ups—his staff had not communicated to him their understanding with Banton, and, in the second, he left no margin of error for attending both an event called by the Prime Minister at short notice in Melbourne and getting back in time to the National Press Club in Canberra. In the frenetic activity of campaigning, with its myriad short-term changes, such logistical errors are more likely to occur. In the last week of the campaign, Labor deputy Julia Gillard ran late for an ABC radio interview with Jon Faine and Peter Costello, in her case she had not left sufficient time to overcome the worse than usual traffic conditions in Melbourne that morning.

The speed of the leaders' campaigning always provides incidents stemming from lack of preparation or momentary confusions. Pat Devery

(2007) in *Crikey* made an amusing list of them in the 2007 campaign, ranging down to such minor lapses as Howard referring to a local Liberal candidate Craig Thomas as 'Scott'. One of the most amusing, inevitably referred to by commentators, with such epithets as 'Malcolm Turnbull gives new meaning to political spin', occurred in a children's playground. When Turnbull spun a toy with a young boy inside, it fell off-balance, rolling on the ground. More serious and embarrassing was the apparent failure in giving advance notice when Rudd visited an old people's home in Tasmania on 25 October. Their concert was disrupted by the massive intrusion, and one affronted elderly performer yelled at the Labor leader, in front of the cameras, that he was an ignorant bastard.

The media, already bristling at how they feel the politicians control them during election campaigns, are ever-ready to seize on such opportunities to break free. In particular the TV news rejoices in any opportunity to escape from the visually orchestrated 'photo opps' of the day into something not planned by the parties. In the past we have had such examples as Howard falling down the steps in 1996 and spraining his ankle (Lloyd 1997) and Keating's 1993 meeting with a baker in a NSW country town where, instead of mutual stroking, the exchange became critical as the shopkeeper attacked some Labor policies.

The micro-irritations between the parties and the media, as the parties seek to ensure that the media are reduced to as passive a role as possible in reporting the day's events, are frequent and deeply felt. While they rarely become explicit in news coverage (Gawenda 2007) they provide the context in which news judgements are made, especially of events which campaigners would see as adverse. Both to forestall demonstrators, and to keep the media off-balance, it has become common practice for the leaders' itineraries not to be released to the media in advance. This in turn produces its own counter-reaction: 'Senior journalists, afraid of being kept in the dark, stay home—to Howard's dismay' (Grattan 2007d).

It was such resentments among the media that elevated one of the Liberals' problems early in the campaign—what some commentators dubbed 'Wormgate'. It seems that the debate hosts, the National Press Club, thought that they had an agreement with Channel Nine, made at the Government's insistence, not to use 'the worm', the graphic of audience responses of approval or disapproval for what is being said. Whatever the rights and wrongs of what occurred, the kerfuffle that followed the debate was damaging for the Government because it kept the focus on the Government losing the debate and seeming to be afraid of scrutiny. Moreover, some commentators used it as a spur to express their general dissatisfaction with government manipulation (Grattan 2007b).

A second source of Abbott's problems was a tendency to be overly combative. The zero-sum nature of the election contest between the

major parties leads to constant attempts to belittle opponents. In the first Abbott case, the combative instinct linked with the pressure for an immediate response led to his distasteful verbal aggression against a dying man. Pressed by the media for a reaction, he launched into this aggression without knowing the full facts: that there had been a communication breakdown in his office, rather than Banton doing anything amiss. So the need for an immediate response can compound an original problem, with instinctive reaction leading to misdirected aggression.

Similar problems with aggression backfiring, although on these occasions at least directed at his actual political opponents, were apparent in Abbott's other cases. The relentless attempt to discredit opponents is a common source of gaffes in election campaigns. Following the embarrassment suffered by the Labor candidate for Wentworth, George Newhouse, about whether he had resigned from a government position in time to lodge a legal candidacy, then Liberal Minister Andrew Robb charged that a dozen Labor candidates had invalid nominations, based solely on internet searches. So he was dubbed by Labor the 'Google assassin'. At least some news accounts showed how baseless Robb's claim was ('Dirty Dozen' smear...*SMH*, 21 November 2007), earning the Liberals as much bad as good publicity.

Another reason for the proliferation of gaffes in election campaigns is the zeal of the opposing party in revealing and escalating them. Perhaps this was most apparent in the furore which followed then Shadow Environment Minister Peter Garrett's remark in an airport lounge when accosted by Sydney commercial radio figure Steve Price. Garrett said that after the election they would change everything. Ever the self-publicist, Price took what Garrett called a 'jocular' remark and treated it as a profound revelation of Labor's real intentions. The Liberals were more than equal to the occasion:

The Liberals went into overdrive, even though it was Saturday. Before you could turn around, they had a bumper sticker and a video out. They'd dug up an old Midnight Oil song with the prescient lines: 'Forget everything that you think you've been promised/Bring on the change.' Everywhere there were cat references. Howard said Garrett had belled the cat. Malcolm Turnbull and Tony Abbott...said Garrett had let the cat out of the bag (Grattan 2007c).

The incident generated an improbable degree of media attention (Coorey 2007a), but it is indicative of how determined both sides are to escalate any weaknesses revealed by the other.

As chess players know, tactics flow from position, and very often tactical mis-steps in an election campaign are mis-applications of established positions. It was clear that, given Labor's lead in the polls, and the successful scare campaigns mounted against oppositions in sight of

victory in the past, that Rudd wanted to wage a 'small target' campaign, just as Howard had in 1996. This of course led to the constant (and accurate) cries of 'me-tooism', although the public portrayal of this perhaps underestimated how far the Coalition had moved in similar efforts at convergence to stop some of Labor's appeals biting electorally (Copycatting so the real...SMH, 3 November 2007).

This strategy meant that Labor often got much less good publicity for similar policy moves. So when Howard announced a package for old age benefits, the *Herald Sun* headline was '\$4b seniors gift/PM unveils wind-fall for pensioners, retirees' (Jean & Packham 2007). A few days later, Labor's announcement was headlined 'Rudd plays follow-the-leader with grey vote policy' (Jean & McManus 2007). *The Daily Telegraph's* front page story was even more critical—'Spot the difference/Copycat campaign hits absurd new heights' (Farr 2007a). Even Rudd's campaign speech about spending restraint, although it won applause from commentators, probably did not itself win any votes. But as a public relations ploy it squeezed Howard. It deprived him of lines about Labor being spendthrift, and made it very difficult for him to make any further big spending promises.

Labor's campaign was about being prepared to sustain tactical losses in order to obtain strategic victories. The wedge prevention strategy led to some momentary problems but—although at times threatening—they never quite escalated into a potent and continuing theme. While successful in an overall sense the Labor small target, wedge prevention strategy led to several tactical embarrassments. The first was when then Shadow Foreign Minister Robert McClelland spoke about Labor's policy against capital punishment. Pouncing on this the Government and some of the media noted it was in the lead-up to the fifth anniversary of the Bali bombings, and so was denounced as insensitive to the victims. Although McClelland was clearly enunciating established policy and although there was almost no difference between Labor and Liberal principles in this area, Rudd immediately moved to defuse the situation: 'I spoke to Robert McClelland this morning and said that I thought his speech last night was insensitive and he agreed with that' (Farmer 2007a).

Similarly, at the end of the second week, Howard pounced on Peter Garrett's remarks about the upcoming Bali negotiations on global warming. The issue was that Garrett said that Australia would commit even before developing countries (read China and India) did. Garrett was forced to issue a clarification the same day. His remarks gained a great deal of media attention, especially in *The Australian*. According to their headline story, 'Garrett's Kyoto blunder/Position reversed after crisis meeting', 'Peter Garrett's political credentials were in tatters last night after Kevin Rudd forced his environment spokesman to issue a humiliating clarification of Labor's greenhouse policy' (Karvelas & Shanahan

2007). Lower on the page, its leading political analyst Paul Kelly (2007), under the headline 'Fiasco exposes Labor weakness', intoned: 'It suggests Garrett is ill-equipped for the job he is likely to inherit next month'.

In both cases, arguably, the shadow minister was putting party policy (although the second case is more ambiguous). But in both cases they were forced to accept one of the central laws of contemporary election campaigning—that the leader is always right, and an individual minister must always give way. On both occasions, there were counter arguments available for Labor to contest the Government's charges—in particular the Coalition was vulnerable about what their negotiating position would be in the coming climate change meetings—but in both they chose to suffer a temporary embarrassment rather than risk the issue escalating.

The final tactical embarrassment that needs to be mentioned came in the middle of the final week of the campaign. 'Picture Exclusive/Libs Busted/Shameful race tactics exposed in key seat' filled the *Daily Telegraph's* front page the morning the Prime Minister was to address the National Press Club (22 November 2007). The husbands of the candidate for Lindsay, Karen Chijoff, and the outgoing member, Jackie Kelly, were—thanks to a tip-off from the New South Wales state branch—caught red-handed trying to distribute fake pamphlets, suggesting Labor favoured Islamic extremism. Then, Kelly, dubbed 'Jihad Jackie' by one headline writer, produced the most stunning radio incident of the campaign when, in an interview with *AM's* Chris Uhlmann, she tried to shrug it off as a humorous *Chaser*-style stunt (quoted in Crabb 2007b).

So the reasons why there are foul-ups, gaffes, mis-steps and multiple embarrassments in all contemporary election campaigns are apparent:

1. the frenetic activity heightens the possibility of logistical or communication problems;
2. the exaggerated posture of being critical of the opposing side leads to overly aggressive hyperbole and distasteful claims;
3. both sides and the media are vigilant for embarrassments, and determined to escalate them;
4. leadership teams are honing their positions for reasons of electoral expedience, and these changes are likely to catch themselves or their colleagues out.

The 2007 campaign was rich in generating such embarrassments, but whether it generated more than other recent elections is difficult to gauge. Moreover, although the Liberals suffered more than Labor, both sides had problems. One post-election story explained the apparent demotion of Labor's campaign director of communications, Walt Secord, to chief of staff to a junior minister, as due to dissatisfaction on the Labor side with their campaign blunders (Mitchell 2007). If the polls are to be believed, if anything, the Government clawed back ground during the election campaign.

The Howard Government's Strategic Baggage and Campaign Coverage

There was a different sense in which the 2007 election was unusual, however. Many of the Howard Government's most controversial policies, or most vulnerable areas of performance, were crystallised in newsworthy developments during the campaign. In the thrust, parry and counter-thrust by party leaders, each side brought strengths and vulnerabilities to the campaign, and these were played out in ways orchestrated by the central campaigners. So in the leaders' debate, in the campaign launches, in their various TV grabs and policy announcements, such issues as Howard's coming retirement (Brett 2007) or union influence in the ALP were brandished about. Some of these became running sores, such as the problems for the Coalition brought by the prospect of 25 nuclear power stations, an idea seemingly embraced by the Prime Minister earlier in the year. But what is most notable about the following is that they were introduced into the campaign by independent third forces or outside participants in ways that the leaders could only partially control but to which they had to respond.

The interest rate rise

By far the most important, and most commented upon issue, was the first interest rate rise during an election campaign, announced by the Reserve Bank on Wednesday 7 November. It followed a calculated gamble by the Coalition. The Reserve Bank, wanting to send signals of predictability to the markets, had set a pattern whereby if interest rates were raised it was done after the quarterly announcement of inflation figures. The Governor of the Reserve Bank, Glenn Stevens, had said publicly that he would not allow an imminent election to affect their decision.

After the inflation figures were announced on 24 October, the speculation was overwhelming that the Bank would lift the rate, and this did the Government almost as much damage as the actual rate rise. The Government was already vulnerable on the issue of interest rates because of its emphasis in the 2004 campaign on keeping rates low, followed by several interest rate rises thereafter. Howard had been questioned on Channel Nine's *Sunday* programme by Laurie Oakes about a 2004 ad promising to keep rates at record lows, and his defence was that he hadn't said it, and he thought the ad only ran for two nights.

After initially denying that a rate rise was likely, the Government changed its stance to argue that a public focus on such issues was a plus for it because it put the focus on the difficulties of economic management where Howard was seen as more competent than Rudd. Glenn Milne (2007c), for example, reported that the Prime Minister was claiming that uncertainty in the US economy demanded that his experienced hands be at the helm.

But in a pattern that was to be repeated, the News Limited papers covered the rate rise in a very positive political frame for the government. On the morning the announcement was to be made, *The Australian* had two page 1 stories, one by Dennis Shanahan (2007a) proclaiming 'PM defies rate rise backlash', and one by Matthew Franklin (2007) confidently predicting 'Voters won't blame Howard'. Then on the morning after, its main story by David Uren and Jennifer Hewett (2007) reported that 'Business backs PM over rates/Howard apologises for mortgage pain', and elsewhere on page 1 Dennis Shanahan (2007b) had 'Home owners in mood to forgive'. The front page of *The Daily Telegraph* had Malcolm Farr (2007b) discovering a similar public mood of forgiveness: 'Not to Blame/Voters won't hold Howard responsible for rate rise'.

The Prime Minister's response to the interest rate rise was perhaps symptomatic of his ingrained patterns of response. The day of the rise—in a planned and seemingly effective statement—he said how sorry he felt for all those who would be affected by it. But then the next day, in response to a sympathetic question from Dennis Shanahan, he tied himself in knots saying he was not apologising over the interest rate rise. This appearance of playing with semantics certainly added to the Government's political discomfort.

Release of official reports

During the campaign period, several official reports and information and actions became public, each of which embarrassed the Government—the National Audit Office Report, the Annual Report of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and a report by the Workplace Authority.

The National Audit Office Report. As has been noted by many (Farmer 2007b),⁸ 'the Howard Government's seat by seat strategy to reverse Labor's poll lead...[was] built on targeted infrastructure and services spending' (Shanahan 2007a). The rhetoric surrounding these pork barrelling exercises was rudely interrupted on November 15 by the Australian National Audit Office. *The Age* (Friday November 16) rightly called it a damning report (Stafford & Topsfield 2007). Its main story highlighted some of the more dramatic cases, and was accompanied by a penetrating analysis by Michelle Grattan (2007e). The paper reported such findings as that ministers were more likely to approve funding for 'not recommended' projects in Coalition electorates and more likely to reject 'approved' projects in opposition electorates. It reported how the then Minister De-Anne Kelly approved sixteen projects worth 3.5 million dollars in 51 minutes just before the government went into caretaker mode before the 2004 election, and it highlighted several individual cases which were problematic in some way or the other.

In contrast the News Limited tabloid papers—despite the populist appeal and rich detail available in the report—published it a long way back, reported it without flair or penetration, and had zero follow-up after the first day (see Tiffen 2007).

Again the Government's response was clumsy. Deputy Prime Minister Vaile raised issues concerning the Auditor-General's actions, but it transpired that the Audit Office had been proceeding according to a normal timetable, and that government ministers had not responded to its earlier inquiries. This report caused one day's embarrassing news for the Government, but no further problems, despite its scathing nature.

Report on Government Advertising. The Annual Report of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet was released on 18 November. Containing data on government advertising—'Howard's \$200m ad splurge'—it earned some unfavourable publicity for the Coalition but not a lot (Smiles & Stafford 2007).

Australian Workplace Fact Sheet, September 2007. On a Friday just over two weeks before the election, the Workplace Authority released figures showing that almost 27,000 Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) had been rejected for failing to comply with minimum standards. The Saturday papers reported this. For example, *The Australian* gave it front page billing with a story by Brad Norrington (2007), 'Red tape strangling AWAs'. Going to the heart of one of the central issues in the campaign, this again was potentially very damaging to the Government, but it disappeared over the weekend.

Rejection of Channel Seven's WorkChoices Freedom of Information claim. At the beginning of the last week of the campaign, a decision was handed down rejecting Channel Seven's request for departmental documents relating to options on the WorkChoices legislation. This also helped Labor because it fed into its claim that the Coalition was planning further changes to WorkChoices. At the beginning of this last week, 'the Prime Minister was forced to spend his time refuting claims of a secret industrial relations agenda' (Kerr 2007). When then Treasurer Peter Costello said there would be no more changes to WorkChoices, Rudd replied that pigs might fly. As Michelle Grattan (2007f) commented:

The kerfuffle about the government's attempt to keep hidden documents from 2005, including other options for industrial relations reform, has been going on [for] more than two years. It was entirely serendipitous for Labor that it came to a head on Monday, with an Administrative Appeals Tribunal decision rejecting the documents' release.

Developments about Global Warming. Last, but second in importance only to the interest rate rise, were developments relating to global warming. Just over a week before the election, as preparation for the upcoming Bali conference, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel

on Climate Change released a summary paper on climate change, which outlined the severe dimensions and urgency of the problem. Richard Farmer (2007d) commented: 'For Prime Minister John Howard the UN can join the Auditor General and the Reserve Bank Board on the list of impediments to a well ordered election campaign' (see also Hunter 2007).⁹

A few days later, Howard was hit by another broadside when former New South Wales Opposition Leader, his fellow NSW conservative Liberal, Peter Debnam, 'addressing an energy summit...said he wished Australia (had) ratified the Kyoto Protocol and that nuclear power was not a realistic option for Australia. He also said the term "clean coal" was an oxymoron' (quoted in Stafford 2007).

Earlier in the campaign there had occurred what I think is the most substantially damaging leak ever to emerge in a contemporary Australian election campaign. Generally leaks are not a large part of election campaigns, as internal party conflicts are subordinated to the more important and pressing inter-party struggle. Occasionally with governments in decline there is the danger of damaging leaks from the public service, but in practice these have been rare (Tiffen 1989, p. 136).

Two weeks into the campaign, a story by Lenore Taylor (2007) in the *Saturday Financial Review* reported that Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull had wanted to ratify the Kyoto Protocol but had been blocked in Cabinet. There was quite a bit of reaction to this dramatic revelation, much of it critical of Turnbull (Milne 2007a), who was the suspected leaker, even though he denied it. Milne (2007b) thought 'the environment minister is quickly undermining his credibility within federal cabinet'. Amid the controversies that followed, then deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile cast doubt on global warming, but there was little follow-up to his remark, far less than to Peter Garrett's comment about negotiating positions (Hart 2007).

Again, although this leak caused the government some discomfort for a couple of days, the damage was not as great as it might have been. Without knowing from the outside what actually transpired behind the scenes, the behaviour of the leaker is consistent with someone wanting to ensure that the information got out but also seeking to contain the embarrassment it would cause to the government. To plant it in a relatively small circulation quality daily, that would treat it in a strong but not sensationalist manner, to have it appear on a Saturday morning, on the day when TV news viewing is at its lowest, and when the Sunday papers are often looking to create their own sensations, all meant that it did not become as sustained or spectacular a focus of news attention as it might have.

Conclusion

In all, it was an unusual election campaign, with contentious aspects of government policy and performance surfacing in ways beyond the orchestrated exchanges between the leading campaigners. Nevertheless the media did not generally pursue these in a vigorous way. Moreover, no substantial section of the mainstream news media was systematically biased against the government. While the television news channels covered with some skill the excitement du jour, they only rarely imposed their own agendas, or pursued stories beyond what the leaders of the major parties were pushing. In contrast the Murdoch press was systematically biased against Labor in its news judgements and framing of stories.¹⁰ This did not reach the peaks that it sometimes has in the past (Lloyd 1977; Goot 1983), or has in Murdoch's UK publications. But neither was it insubstantial.

Both sides suffered tactical mishaps and other problems during the campaign, the Liberals somewhat more than Labor. But there is no evidence that they were responsible for the government's defeat. The Government went into the campaign lagging considerably and consistently behind Labor in the polls. In this sense the election was Labor's to lose. Moreover the Government also carried into the campaign substantial strategic baggage, and this made it all but impossible for it to generate the improbable degree of momentum it would have needed to change the result. In other words, it was the cards they had rather than the way they played them that cost them the election.

Notes

- ¹ Ownership of the Australian daily metropolitan press is very concentrated. The Murdoch press includes the national paper *The Australian*, plus the Melbourne and Sydney tabloids, the *Herald-Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph* as well as the local monopoly papers, the *Courier-Mail*, *The Advertiser* and the *Mercury*. The Fairfax press is the second largest group, and includes the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, plus *The Australian Financial Review*. The only two 'stand-alone' titles are the locally-owned *West Australian* and the *Canberra Times*, owned by Rural Press.
- ² It must be stressed that neutrality and objectivity are quite different attributes. An explanation which may adversely impact on someone's political fortunes can still be objective.
- ³ We are talking here of established democracies where the rules of the game are fair and properly observed. Very occasionally in these countries, electoral fraud or loaded procedures are sufficient to explain the outcome, as in the US 2000 Presidential election.
- ⁴ Six months before the poll, it was common for government ministers to say that, once an election was in prospect, then Labor's lead would disappear. The Prime Minister had even mused that the voters were joking, but

in May he suddenly changed tune, telling the party room that they were facing annihilation. Health Minister Tony Abbott thought 'the risk is that we might sleepwalk into changing the government in a fit of absent-mindedness' (Grattan 2007a).

- ⁵ The opposite proposition—that the government had been so busy politicking that its credentials for good governance were damaged—would have greater credibility. Arguably, especially in areas involving federal-state relations, its rhetoric and interventions were governed wholly by partisan expedience in the months leading up to the election (see e.g. Farmer 2007c).
- ⁶ Some pen portraits gave very different accounts of an energetic and upbeat Prime Minister.
- ⁷ At least she gave a reason. Her husband and her co-biographer of Howard, David Barnett, treated the loss as due to Rudd's greater popularity, which he found simply inexplicable.
- ⁸ After the election, Tim Colebatch (2007) observed how unsuccessful this had been. 'Of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives, 144 had swung to Labor. Of the 27 electoral regions defined by the AEC, all 27 swung to Labor.' Compare this with Sol Lebovic's (2007a) prediction that 'this election looks set to provide wild variations'.
- ⁹ Just before the campaign began the CSIRO had also issued a report on climate change.
- ¹⁰ Apart from its consistently kind treatment (except for Jihad Jackie) of these potentially embarrassing stories for the Government, it tried to manufacture embarrassments for the Opposition. The major *Herald Sun* election story on 23 October (dominating page 3, the next election coverage was on page 12) was Gerard McManus: 'Gillard under fire/Labor's deputy says her Socialist Forum role was 20 years ago, yet she was still a member in 2002'. They also ran a phone-in poll on whether she had been honest. Taking the whole of the *Daily Telegraph's* front page on Tuesday 20 November 2007 was 'Caught in the Act', with the revelation that the person portraying a blue-collar worker in a Labor ad was a professional actor.

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