Marketing, truth and political expediency

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- *Countries have been built on the hopes, dreams and courage of refugees. In recent years, the global refugee problem has become more intense, and reactions from governments around the world have been generally negative. This paper explores and describes the way in which a hitherto unpopular Australian Government managed and communicated an apparent 'refugee crisis' to win an election campaign, using information known at the time to be untruthful. It compares the messages used to win the election with the truth that subsequently emerged, and relates this to political marketing, especially the theories of Machiavelli. It concludes by describing the situation post-election and discusses some potential implications for public affairs.*
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The issue

People have been emigrating since before Moses went to Israel. The immigration issue is having an impact on the economies of most developed and many developing countries. Large flows of humanity, often uncontrolled and crisis-driven, move across borders. This flow of refugees presents leaders in destination countries with both political opportunities and political threats. Refugees 'have been a tangible index of social and political turmoil throughout the ages, from the Jewish exiles in Babylon to the religious refugees of medieval Europe to the Afghans, Ethiopians and Indochinese of today' (Dowty, 1987). The mobility of people worldwide, and humanitarian issues related to refugees from wars and persecution, ethnic politics and economic migration result-ing from inequitable global wealth distribution are fundamental issues to be addressed. Unfortunately, discussion of these vital issues has been clouded, or even hijacked, by the emotion, heat and misrepresentation that have emerged as various stakeholders have responded, sometimes opportunistically, to human tragedy.

The refugee problem

Recent events have shown that, while political philosophers may assert that freedom of movement is 'the first and most fundamental of man's liberties' (Cranston, 1973), governments are increasingly differing from this Utopian opinion. As an example of the skilful handling of such a situation, we analyse the handling of the 'refugee crisis' in Australia at the time of the 2001 national election and explore the 'truth'.

Current estimates by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) of

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the total global human population is six billion, of whom approximately 150 million (2.5%) are international migrants and 19 million are 'persons of concern' (http://www.unhcr.ch/). 'Persons of concern' include asylum seekers, refugees returning home and people uprooted within their own countries—so-called internally displaced persons (IDPs). Of these 19 million people, 8,820,700 are found in Asia, 4,855,400 in Europe and 1,086,800 in Northern America. There are 81,300 persons of concern in Oceania. A total of 6100 asylum applications were made to Australia in 2002 (UNHCR, 2003). In 2001–2, 1212 people arrived in Australia without proper authority in a total of six boats (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003). Persons of concern account for 0.3% of the global population. The number of asylum applications in Australia in 2002 (6100) is a factor of ten smaller, at 0.03%, and the 1212 unauthorized arrivals in 2001–2 amount to only 0.006% of Australia's population of 20 million people. It can clearly be seen that the Australian situation is relatively insignificant compared with the mass movements elsewhere in the world, in both absolute and proportional terms.

Historical attitudes

Countries have been built on the hopes, dreams and courage of refugees. The poem by Emma Lazarus mounted on the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour (reproduced in Hirsch *et al*., 2002) includes the lines:

'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.'

The attitudes that founded the most powerful nation on earth seem now to be changing. Indeed, so do the sentiments expressed in Australia's own national anthem:

'For those who've come across the seas,
We've boundless plains to share,
With courage let us all combine,
To advance Australia fair.'

Changed attitudes of today—raise the drawbridge!

Martin (2001) commented that 'Post World War II immigration was once used as an instrument of foreign policy against Communism by first world countries. Whilst we see an increase of nationalism in some new democracies and the destabilization of other countries, there is an unravelling of the precious generosity in refugee support throughout Europe, and North America and Australia'. In Europe, the far right of the political spectrum took advantage of the situation to increase its popularity.

Jorg Haider's success with the far-right Freedom Party in Austria brought disquiet from all over Europe, including sanctions imposed by the EU, and the pressure resulted in him stepping down, although his party remained in coalition government.

Jean-Marie Le Pen won 17% of the vote in the first round of the French presidential elections in 2002, beating Socialist Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin. Le Pen achieved the highest vote ever for a far-right politician, although the incumbent Jacques Chirac clearly won the final ballot.

Pym Fortuyn of the Netherlands was not so lucky. He was murdered nine days before the general elections but had been expected to pick up 15% of the Dutch vote with his anti-immigration stance.

German conservative Chancellor candidate, Edmund Stoiber, used immigration issues in his bid to be the first Bavarian Chancellor of Germany, although incumbent Gerhard Schroeder retained power for another term.

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen holds office due to a coalition with the Danish People's Party. They made foreigners, immigrants, fugitives and their crimes the main issues for their successful campaign.

In post-Tampa Norway, the government of Jens Stoltenberg lost office to a right-wing

coalition promising to stem the influx of foreigners.

Malcolm Fraser, who was Prime Minister of Australia at the time of the influx of post-Vietnam War refugees, recently wrote: 'In the late 1970s and 1980s thousands of refugees from Indochina were accepted into Australia and other countries with generosity and good-will, yet now our attitude to refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan is quite different' (Fraser, 2002). It should be noted that after decades of almost uninterrupted economic growth, Australia is considerably wealthier in 2003 than it was in 1975, so the economic capacity to help is greater, although the political will has changed.

The Australian election

In Australia, the Liberal (which, in the local political arena, is the main conservative pro-business party) Federal Government was facing defeat in 2001 following the introduction of a broad-based consumption tax in July 2000, despite a previous election commitment not to do so. While an unprecedented gap in popularity between the two major parties was starting to close as the election came closer, the Government was still deeply unpopular (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003). However, before and during the campaign, several asylum seeker issues emerged. In August 2001, the Norwegian ship 'Tampa' rescued 433 refugees from a sinking boat at the request of Australian Search and Rescue. Some days of high-profile activity ensued, with Australia breaching generally accepted maritime practice by refusing permission for the ship to proceed to the nearest land, Australian territory at Christmas Island. The Prime Minister announced that no matter what, none of the Tampa refugees would set foot on Australian soil, thus stimulating a shift in support, particularly from blue-collar voters, away from Labour (Ward, 2002). During the election campaign itself, there were well-publicized images of children who were untruthfully claimed to have been thrown overboard from a small refugee boat in an attempt to force Australia to give them asylum.

Under the mantra 'We decide who comes to this country' and 'protecting our borders', the Government won the election, and the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the main opposition party, was reduced to its lowest vote since 1931. The remarkable change in political fortunes was presented graphically by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and is reproduced in **Figure 1**, below.

This poll is an historical monthly average of data of voters' intentions derived from three key polling organizations: Newspoll (as published by *The Australian*), Morgan Poll (as published by *The Bulletin*) and AC Nielsen (as published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*). (State elections both before and since the Federal poll returned Labour governments, generally convincingly.) In large measure, this rapid change of fortune happened as a result of what has become known as the 'children overboard' incident, described in detail below. Populism and xenophobia were associated with the rise in popularity of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party in the late 1990s. Possibly because of this, or in direct response to strong public support for the Government's position on the 'Tampa' refugees, the ALP chose not to differentiate itself from the Government on this issue. For example, the then Opposition Leader, Kim Beazley, said during the campaign 'We've supported [Prime Minister] Howard on every proposition he's put forward that deals with that evil trade [people smuggling]. And
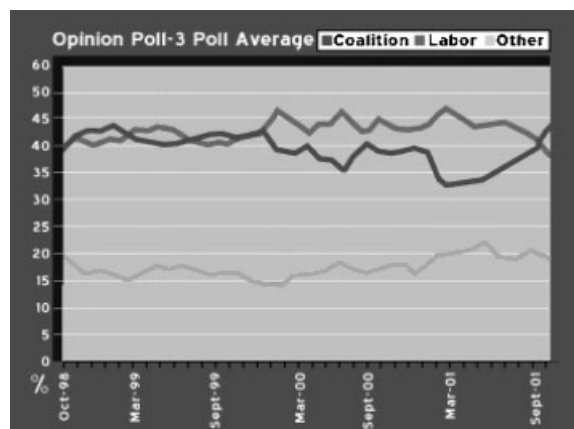

Figure 1. National Opinion Poll: 1998–2001 (source: Australian Broadcasting Corporation).

still they come. In some instances it means they sink offshore and die. In other instances it means they come into our area and give considerable trouble, of course, to our officials in handling them' (Beazley, 2001).

The lack of opposition from the Opposition left many ALP voters feeling disillusioned. Many from the Left voted Green, with the usual swing late in an election campaign away from minor parties not occurring to a great extent. The disillusionment was not restricted to those of the Left, as there were also protests from conservative voters, some of whom directed their first preference votes to the Greens and endorsed their ballot papers 'Tampa' or other pro-refugee slogans.

The theoretical context

Political marketing has tended to 'concentrate on the marketing issues associated with electoral politics, image, voter behaviour, promotion and some aspects of party management, especially media management or what has come to be known as ''spin doctoring''' (Harris, 2001). Certainly, people who work in Australian political parties believe that they follow the marketing concept, although they do not necessarily understand it fully (O'Cass, 2001). Broadly summarising, there is a concentration on marketing communications rather than the marketing concept as a whole, with issues such as societal marketing (using marketing for the benefit of society as a whole) being conspicuously absent from the literature to date (e.g. Harris, 2001; Lock and Harris, 1996; O'Cass, 2001).

It has been noted (Titley, 2003) that 'politicians are tending to follow rather than lead public opinion', which is in contrast to the early Liberal philosopher Edmund Burke's view (quoted in Collins and Butler, 2003) in the eighteenth century that 'your representative owes you . . . his judgement; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion'. This is consistent with the political theory of Machiavelli, who advocated acting in harmony with the times, which included, under extreme circumstances when the liberty

of the state was threatened, use of emergency powers that at other times would be considered amoral (Harris, 2001). Enoch Powell, the former distinguished classical scholar (he was granted a Chair at Sydney University when aged 25 years) and UK politician who gained strong electoral support from racist elements in UK society, said that he succeeded by crystallising what people thought, even though they did not express or even know it (Parkin, 2000). This 'cut across the conceited vision whereby a politician forms rather than responds to opinion . . . however emotional, prejudicial, and symbolic, rather than rational, this be. He knew how to . . . encourage, nay render inevitable, the enhancement of the principles he would begin by evoking . . . deliberately peppered his speeches with controversial material which [was] slightly extravagant . . . good marketing?' (Parkin, 2000).

The use of controversial material provides an example of the use of Powell's tactics, and was fundamental to the Australian Government's election win discussed in this paper, raising issues of Machiavelli's public versus private morality. Without suggesting that amoral actions should be the norm, Machiavelli would argue that if there was a conflict, precedence should be given to 'taking action which was publicly moral (i.e. designed to secure the liberty of the state) at the short term expense of private morality' (Harris, 2001). Harris cites Machiavelli (1983): ' . . . for when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid to either justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious'. It is doubtful whether 6100 asylum applications in a year and six boatloads of unauthorized arrivals could reasonably be seen as a threat to the safety of Australia, especially in the light of much greater pressures elsewhere in the world, but there are opportunities for less scrupulous politicians to capitalize upon, and even stimulate, the fears of the populations that elect them to power. It is interesting to consider that the words 'An evil exists that threatens every man, woman and child of this great nation. We must take steps to

ensure our domestic security and protect our Homeland' could as easily have been spoken on behalf of many Western governments today as by Adolf Hitler in 1933 in his speech announcing the formation of the Gestapo.

As Ramsay (2000) points out, some studies in Machiavellian theory suggest that 'the moral dilemmas associated with the necessity to lie, manipulate, betray, cheat, steal and kill arise more frequently in public life . . . than they do in private life . . . [politicians] are responsible for policies which have greater and more enduring consequences that affect the lives and well-being of a greater number of people than the actions of private individuals . . . politicians' actions ought to be assessed in a different way'. However, she argues cogently that immoral means are not necessarily justified by the frequency of moral dilemmas in politics, and that the importance of political decisions ought to imply that politicians and policy makers should be more reluctant to be immoral than the reverse. 'The justification of lies and deceit . . . seems to violate democratic principles' and politics are not 'above, beyond or exempt from the moral order' (Ramsay, 2000).

Collins and Butler (2003) studied marketing models in political and public sector contexts and found that ' . . . in the political context, responding rapidly to public opinion is not necessarily a sound reaction . . . the features of liberal representative democracy, particularly the role of deliberation, informed assent and accountability, have been neglected . . . the application of market research is no substitute for political discourse and engagement'.

As was pointed out in this journal recently, 'We have become so used to a model of electors as consumers, choosing between the products that are offered in the political market place, that we may be ill prepared for political responses based on fear and anger . . . the fate of the Western Balkans was a clear reminder of what happens when political elites fail to innovate or to tell each other the truth' (Spencer, 2002).

Spencer (2002) further suggests that the intrusiveness of governments and media has reduced privacy to the extent that 'truth may be simply the most economic way of conduct-ing business, although many of the arts of public affairs involve tampering with the timing of truth'. This concept, the strategic timing of truth, is exemplified, *inter alia*, in the political history outlined in this paper.

Hartley (1982) points out that the State and the news media (as well as the law) share a mantle of impartiality, and that 'Neither the State, nor the law, nor the news can work if they appear openly to serve a particular class or group; their credibility in each case is dependent on their being identified not with class or sectional interests but with the general or public interest'. Elections are clearly about the interests of political parties and their backers; equally clearly, good national government— including the treatment of international refugees—is not.

It has been said that ' . . . the mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). However, this paper is restricted to studying the messages sent by the political party in power during an election campaign and comparing them with the truth that was known by some of the players at the time, which emerged to the general population some time later. It could be argued, however, that the translation and distortion of facts for public consumption in this case could be seen as an example of Herman and Chomsky's 'manufacturing consent' (1988)! The role of the media, and its lack of critical comment as events progressed, has been covered elsewhere, notably by Ward (2002).

The 'overboard' affair—what happened

On 5 October 2001 an Australian Federal election was called, to be held on 10 November. On the morning of 7 October, HMAS Adelaide approached an Indonesian fishing boat containing many Iraqi asylum seekers as it entered

Australian waters near Christmas Island. From this point on, the stories from the Government and the asylum seekers diverge to a remarkable extent.

What was communicated—perception management

In Australia, it was reported by the Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, that 'disturbingly, a number of children have been thrown overboard, again with the intention of putting us under duress . . . clearly planned and premeditated . . . people wouldn't have come wearing life jackets unless they intended some action of this sort' (Kingston, 2001). On 9 October, the Prime Minister commented on ABC radio that 'the behaviour of a number of these people, particularly those throwing their children overboard. I mean I can't understand why a genuine refugee would do that . . . I certainly don't want people of that type in Australia' (Prime Minister's website: http://www.pm. gov.au/news/interviews/2001/interview1372. htm).

On 10 October, the then Defence Minister, Peter Reith, stated unequivocally 'it did happen. The fact is that children were thrown into the water . . . it is an absolute fact, children were thrown into the water . . . they disabled the pumps on the boat . . . they made life as difficult as possible for the Navy' (Trioli, 2001). (Reith had announced his retirement from Parliament and was not standing for re- election.) Photographs were provided, initially at a radio interview, bizarrely, but later published in the press, showing some people in the water, and assertions were made that this was proof of the children overboard story. A few days after the incident, it was announced that film of the incident had been taken and Minister Reith made the comments quoted above. Minister Ruddock saw the film for the first time on 8 November and told reporters: 'I am incredulous as to why there is scepticism because people just don't make these sort of things up . . . why would we do it? It's just not feasible . . . all we know is that children were thrown in and others jumped in' (Kingston, 2001).

The alternative view

By contrast, the asylum seekers themselves said, in a letter to Australian senators after they arrived at a detention centre on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, that their boat was boarded by armed marines from HMAS Adelaide under the pretext of providing supplies. The marines then forcibly took over navigation of the boat, reversing its direction so that it was returning to Indonesia, as well as increasing engine speed to the extent that unnatural smoke was generated and the engines failed (Australian Government, 2002). The marines then left the boat with the engine and water pump broken, returning when it became apparent that the boat was unable to move. Attempts to repair the engines were not successful so the frigate started to tow the Indonesian boat back to Australian waters through rough seas. This affected the structure of the boat and it started to take on water and sink. As the water level in the boat reached 1 metre deep, the asylum seekers are quoted as saying: ' . . . in that moment of horror some of us repeated attempts to lift our kids to gain their sympathy and to show then [sic] we have kids and women on the boat' (Australian Government, 2002). The frigate's crew told the asylum seekers that their orders, direct from the Prime Minister's office, were that rescue from drowning would only be permitted when the boat was completely submerged and all the passengers and crew were in the water. The frigate's crew supplied life jackets to replace inadequate ones on board the boat. The boat then sank, despite efforts with pumps from the frigate, taking with it documents and other valuables belonging to the asylum seekers. The asylum seekers were rescued by the crew of HMAS Adelaide, some of whom placed themselves in considerable danger by doing so. This story was largely supported by a subsequent Senate inquiry (Australian Government, 2002).

Legislative and administrative support

The Government had considerable legislative and administrative support in the management

of the issue, some long standing, some hastily prepared, as the situation unfolded. Some aspects are included below.

Mandatory detention

'Australia is the only Western country to have compulsory, mandatory, non-reviewable detention, places surrounded by razor wire, where inmates are known by numbers and not by their names'. (Fraser, 2002) The Migration Act 1958 stipulates that if any non-Australian citizens arrive on Australian shores without 'proper' travel documents, they are subject to the automatic operation of the legislation requiring the detention of an 'unauthorized arrival'.

Limiting judicial review

In 1994, the Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Migration had tabled its report on the detention of asylum seekers, Asylum, Border Control and Detention. The committee's brief was to consider bridging visas and alternatives to detention for people without visas. Despite the brief, the committee recommended limiting the availability of judicial review for refugee applicants.

Border Protection Bill (2001)

On the second last sitting day of Parliament before the election, the Senate passed six bills relating to border protection; this included measures to strengthen the deterrence of unauthorized arrivals, excluded some Australian territories from the Australian migration zone and further limited the grounds for judicial review of refugee cases (Australian Government, 2002).

'Pacific Solution'

The Government established offshore processing centres in the nearby economically disadvantaged countries of Nauru and Papua New Guinea in order to keep asylum seekers outside Australian territory. The initial budget for this was A$232m (Costello, 2002) and

within its first year, 1515 people had been transferred to those centres for processing (Australian Government, 2002).

Clearance of all press releases

Defence Minister Peter Reith issued instructions to his department's media relations staff that required all statements to be cleared by his office or by his junior minister, Bruce Scott, preventing journalists from approaching asylum seekers, and requiring reporters to obtain information from the Immigration Minister's press secretary in Canberra (Ward, 2002).

The chairman of the Press Council, Professor Ken McKinnon, said that the council deplored these restrictions: 'As the Prime Minister, John Howard, has often said, a free press is crucial to the proper functioning of democracy. It is of grave concern, therefore, that his government is severely restricting the ability of the news media to report freely on a question that has become central to political debate in Australia'. The then Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, denied that the Government was restricting media access to asylum seekers, maintaining that it was merely protecting the asylum seekers' privacy: 'What we restrict are detainees seeking access to journalists' (Australian Press Council, 2002).

Dehumanising of refugees

Brian Humphreys, the defence department's director of communication strategies, appeared before the Senate Select Committee enquiry on a Certain Maritime Incident on 17 April 2002. He gave evidence that the minister's press secretary advised him on the 'types of comments for the media' and asked him to ensure that no 'personalising or humanising' images were taken of 'boatpeople'. These instructions were introduced 'in relation, first of all, [to the] Tampa' and subsequent issues (Hansard, 2002).

Communications

The Australian Government used specific language that effectively demonized refugees

as 'people of that type', carefully creating an 'enemy' and excluding them from society. The use of such tactics by the Government clearly resembles those recommended by Enoch Powell, with similar electoral effects. 'The social construction of an enemy fulfils several important functions. We define ourselves by reference to what we are not. This clarifies our values or where we stand, and gives us a coherent sense of selfhood. Secondly, it is only by reference to enemies that we became united, and the greater the internal discord within societies, the more powerful will our need for enemies be: the propaganda construction of enemies is a source of social integration' (O'Shaughnessy, 2002).

The use of terms such as 'queue jumpers' and 'waves' of 'illegal immigrants' were used to build emotion and attitudes to the issue.

Disturbing images of parents throwing their children overboard were used to exemplify the unacceptability of these newcomers. Even though the images used as evidence of their evil were later found to be of a totally different event and were used untruthfully in this context, at the time they were used to great effect to stimulate righteous shock at such behaviour.

Human resources

The successful management of the refugee issue in Australia has been fully supported by the resources of the Australian Government.

Ward (2002) identified the considerable capacity of the Federal Government to support their message and potentially to manage the news output concerning the issue, illustrated by the fact that there are no fewer than 105 Department of Defence public affairs staff, with an annual budget of around A$11.6m (Garran, 2001). Steketee (2001) pointed out that all ministers have media advisors to manage their interaction with the news media: in all, the Howard Government employs nearly three dozen media minders. This includes a senior communication advisor, a senior media advisor and a press secretary on the Prime Minister's own 18-strong staff. The coverage of

the Tampa appears to be a case in point, in that, as Steketee (2001) suggested, minders were winning the battle for media control.

Direct costs of the 'Pacific Solution'

The first year of the 'Pacific Solution', where asylum seekers intercepted before reaching the Australian mainland were to be accommodated on various small Pacific islands under unpleasant conditions, was budgeted in May 2001 to cost A$232m, according to a statement by the Federal Treasurer in Parliament, but by February 2002 the figure was expected to reach A$482m (Costello, 2002). Payments to Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), the firm contracted by the Government to run detention centres in Australia and offshore, had increased to over A$100m per annum in 2000, doubling ACM's pre-tax profit to A$14.75m in that calendar year. This made the Australian Government the third largest customer worldwide of Wackenhut Corrections Corporation, the privately owned US business that was, at the time, the parent company of ACM (Mares, 2001).

The Navy's Operation Relex involved a significant increase in not only the scope but also the scale of Australian border protection operations, and particularly the nature of the assets deployed. The Navy's major fleet units, frigates, amphibious ships and auxiliaries now played a leading role in interception and boarding operations, in addition to Customs and Coastwatch craft. A 'layered surveillance' operation, utilising RAAF P-3 Orions, Navy helicopters and Coastwatch aircraft, supported the Navy's interdiction effort (Australian Government, 2002).

The truth

In view of the controversy, a Senate Select Committee enquiry was held after the election, quaintly called 'An Enquiry into a Certain Maritime Incident' (Australian Government, 2002). The election had been won by the incumbent Government, against the trend of opinion polls in the preceding months, which

reflected voter dissatisfaction with a new broad-based consumption tax, as well as the results of State elections, with all States having Labour governments. Although considerably hampered by the refusal of the government to allow certain witnesses to provide evidence, including the (by then former) Minister Reith, the committee was able unequivocally to report on the claims repeatedly made by senior ministers, as well as the Prime Minister, about children being thrown overboard: '*The story was in fact untrue*' (Australian Government, 2002).

The photographs of the sinking of the boat on 8 October had been publicly represented as evidence supporting the 'children overboard' assertion on 7 October. No children were thrown overboard from that boat. By 11 October, the naval chain of command had concluded that no children had been thrown overboard. The Chief of the Defence Force was told on that day that there were serious doubts about that report, and Minister Reith was informed on the same day of the true date of the photographs. Reith did not inform the Prime Minister of the doubts about the photographs until 7 November, three days before the election. Even so, 'No correction, retraction or communication about the existence of doubts about the incident . . . or the photographs . . . was made by the Government before the election on 10 November' (Australian Government, 2002).

Some responses to the untruths

The Government has not apologized for making statements during an election campaign that are now known to be untrue. It continues to detain refugees, including children, indefinitely in onshore and offshore detention centres, despite growing public criticism. However, issues of Government truthfulness have not, to date, struck a responsive chord with the majority of the Australian electorate. The following are responses to these untruths:

- Political journalists with decades of experience, Marr and Wilkinson (2003): 'They put lives at risk. They twisted the law. They drew the military into the heart of an election campaign. They muzzled the press. They misused intelligence services, defied the United Nations, antagonized Indonesia and bribed poverty stricken Pacific states. They closed Australia to refugees—and won a mighty election victory'.

- In the words of the previous Liberal Prime Minister, 'The Government and the Opposition did not fall into this policy blindly. They have planned for it and prepared for it. The boat people have been demonized. They have been termed queue jumpers when there is no real queue. They have been accused of being wealthy, of being economic migrants. They have been accused of abusing their children and throwing them overboard. They have suffered the great crime of being branded as different and from a different religion . . . when in fact [these] people are fleeing a most terrible regime, where girls could not be educated and women were not allowed to work and which victimized minority groups . . . which the United States and its allies have gone to war to destroy . . . The 650,000 refugees who have settled in Australia since the Second World War know that you flee persecution by whatever means and often without papers. In the past these people have been welcomed' (Fraser, 2002).

- Lawyer Julian Burnside QC (2003): 'The [mandatory detention] system very likely amounts to a crime against humanity'.

- Former Federal Court Judge and UNICEF Ambassador for Children Justice Marcus Einfeld (2001): 'People seeking refugee asylum are not illegal migrants. In making their applications for refugee status, they are doing something expressly permitted by Australian and international law. No one suggests that we should have open borders. There must be controls on movements of people in and out of countries not their own. But the current problems have been caused by many events in many countries, not all of their own making, and are not within the power of any one country to regulate'.

- Former Test cricket captain Ian Chappell (2003): 'No matter what you think about protecting the Australian borders, these are human beings and you just can't treat them like that...I feel horrible about having to apologize for my own country. That's a horrible position. I don't like being put in that position'.
- The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (2002) concluded its report on arbitrary detention by 'expressing its hope that Australia will take the initiative to review its laws in order to bring them into compliance with commonly accepted international standards, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights'.

While it is not surprising to have political journalists disagreeing with Government actions, it is interesting to have such trenchant criticism of an incumbent government from the previous Prime Minister of the same political party, from numerous lawyers and public figures from across the political, social and educational spectrum, and even from the United Nations.

Reflections for public affairs

There are a number of issues arising from this case that are of relevance to public affairs practitioners and commentators, not just in the world of politics but, by extension, to corporate governance and community standards of behaviour. It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate on the existence or nature of underlying attitudes of xenophobia or greed that may have influenced voter decision making. There are, however, some implications that can be drawn for public policy from the Australian experience.

Trade relations with international neighbours

Previous governments have seen the development of improved relations with Australia's Asian neighbours as an essential component of Australia's long-term economic survival. Richard Butler, former executive chairman of the United Nations Special Commission to Disarm Iraq, and later Governor of the State of Tasmania, stated his concerns that the 'impact in Asia of Howard's identification of Australia with the US has been far reaching. The proposed free trade agreement, the automatic character of Australia's military co-operation with the US and Australia's treatment of refugees are three actions that have been interpreted as putting an end to almost four decades of striving by Australia to integrate into the Asian region' (Butler, 2003).

Government secrecy

Stuart (2003) comments on the changing nature of political decision making. He highlights the growing power of ministerial advisers and their role in protecting their bosses from 'hearing news that will come back to haunt them—and to stop information spilling into the public arena'. Evaluating two opposing attitudes to this change, he poses the optimist's view that 'the culture of secrecy in government is an inevitable and necessary response to the war on terror'. Pessimists fear the abuse of such secrecy, in view of the Government's behaviour in recent times, apparent misinformation about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the children overboard affair and other issues. He cites the 1997 US Congressional Report into secrecy and government to outline his concerns about the possible outcomes: 'excessive secrecy has significant consequences for the national interest when, as a result, policy makers are not fully informed, government is not held accountable for its actions ant the public cannot engage in informed debate' (Stuart, 2003). This is clearly an application of Machiavelli's principle of public, rather than private, morality.

Government truthfulness

The acceptability, or otherwise, of a Government being untruthful to its electorate is an issue that has become more important in recent times in Australia and other countries, notably the UK and the USA, with the debate over the rights and wrongs of the war in Iraq,

although voter reactions have varied in different countries. In the case of the war on Iraq, there have been suggestions that the ends might justify the means, in that an obnoxious regime has been removed from power. In the case considered in this paper, the ends are less glorious; the re-election of a previously unpopular government. It has now been conclusively stated that the story of children being thrown overboard was in fact untrue; this acknowledgement of the truth was made after the election, fortunate timing for those who managed this issue.

Human rights of refugees

The acceptability, or otherwise, of the lack of dignity and respect for the human rights of refugees fleeing for their lives is a moral issue. As such, it is beyond the scope of this paper, except to note that there is a growing protest movement against the mistreatment of refugees, as evidenced above.

Conclusion

The Australian Government's attitude towards refugees is tougher than most, but if seen to be successful may of course be copied by other countries. What defines success, of course, is a moot point; is success a short-term gain in political popularity, against which must be debited the humanitarian costs to the individuals concerned and the risk of increased racial tensions within the community? Or is success defined as insulating certain wealthy countries from the effect of global movements of refugees by excluding all those except for a chosen few, pushing the burden back on to poorer countries? Or is success to be seen as reducing the flow of refugees from troubled parts of the world in general, in the hope that, unlike previous mass movements of refugees that also met with destination country resistance (such as Jews fleeing the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s), the mortal threat is not in fact as serious as claimed? It would be too utopian to hope that the refugee problem be treated at its root cause, which is mainly human

conflict. That said, there is a compelling argument for wealthier countries to take their share of the refugee burden. It will be interesting to see what the long-term effect of the Australian Government's harsh treatment of refugees will be. Certainly it continued to enjoy popularity with the majority of voters, as it was again returned to office in 2004. Alternatively, there may be an electoral backlash as voters come to understand the way in which they were misled and learn more about the effect of the Pacific Solution and mandatory detention on refugees, and the financial and humanitarian cost of such treatment of the relatively small number of individuals involved. If there is no backlash, then it may be that acting in short-term self-interest with little regard for less fortunate members of society will become an increasingly acceptable tool in the management of public opinion and resources.

Collins and Butler (2003), quoted earlier, showed that responding rapidly to public opinion is not necessarily a sound reaction. In the case discussed here, there is considerable evidence to suggest that, more than just responding rapidly, the strength and nature of public opinion in Australia was manipulated, using untruths, for short-term political gain. This was an action that even Machiavelli would have found too 'Machiavellian' to countenance, and exemplifies Spencer's (2002) concerns about tampering with the timing of the truth.

Is this good marketing? In the sense used by Parkin (2000) in describing Enoch Powell's attention-getting tactics, it would seem to be. In terms of societal marketing, where marketing is used for the benefit of society as a whole, probably not, unless the common good of Australia is dependent upon excluding asylum seekers, or indeed if there were other issues that made the incumbent Government more beneficial to the nation than the Opposition. Certainly for the unfortunate asylum seekers concerned, it was not good marketing, and the objections reported above from a wide spectrum of Australian citizens would also indicate that a considerable proportion of opinion leaders in the target market are dissatisfied

with the policy. There are concerns that such media manipulation encourages racist sentiments in society. Spencer (2002) attributed the tragic fate of the Western Balkans to the failure of political elites to tell the truth. Although the case illustrates the effectiveness of Enoch Powell's tactical approach to political marketing (as described in Parkin, 2002), these tactics may have long-term divisive effects on a multicultural society built on migration. Considerable protest at the manipulation of the truth and the continuing detention of asylum seekers has been made from a remarkably wide cross-section of Australian society. The long-term effect of such divisiveness on Australian society, and on refugee issues worldwide, remains to be seen.

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