

## 4. Minorities

One of the greatest puzzles of John Howard's leadership has been his treatment of minority groups, in particular, Indigenous Australians, refugees, asylum seekers and Muslims.

His friends avoid calling him a racist; many of his detractors are less circumspect. In a radical departure from the practice of the last several decades, John Howard has used race to differentiate himself from the opposition parties. No other recent prime minister has been willing to do this.

Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating entered their prime ministerships with firmly held beliefs about equality and multiculturalism. History told them just how easily xenophobia (fear of strangers) could trigger communal hatreds, civil conflicts and much worse. At the first sign of racism, they reminded us that racism was un-Australian. Their multiculturalism was based on the notion of 'a fair go for all', and was bipartisan. Liberal and Labor leaders agreed to work together on issues that were potentially racially divisive.

Howard, however, saw Labor's support for multiculturalism and minority groups as a political opportunity.

Racial issues have been in the background of many of Howard's decisions. We have seen, for example, his willingness to declare war on a Muslim nation and to adopt the United States-style policy of pre-emptive military attacks in our Asian neighbourhood. We have witnessed his unwillingness to condemn Pauline Hanson's racist comments. We also witnessed his rhetoric in the children overboard affair, the Tampa incident, the Pacific solution, and the human rights abuses against men, women and children in refugee detention centres.

He has promoted his own whitewashed version of post-settlement Aboriginal history and jeers at those who point to other, more painful elements, calling them the 'black armband' brigade. As well, he has refused to take part in Aboriginal reconciliation and to say sorry, he has opposed Aboriginal land rights and has abolished the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and its supporting bodies. To this day, we see him supporting negative stereotypes of Muslims and Aboriginals.

Why was Howard so keen to break with conservative liberal principles and attack minorities?

In his long and galling years in opposition, Howard saw the Keating government backing a range of special interests. Howard could not relate to the attitudes of the day, to multiculturalism, human rights, land rights, equal opportunity, and the government's role promoting these—in his terms—'peripheral' issues.

One journalist has suggested, indeed, that Howard had come to loathe what he saw as the 'politically correct' views of this new orthodoxy. He was convinced that the average Australian felt just as angry and just as locked out as he did:

He determined that when he became Prime Minister, he would allow free speech – what he terms a diversity of views – to flourish, wherever it might lead. He would change the culture.<sup>1</sup>

Howard's insight was to appreciate the power of people's resentments against some of Keating's generously funded attempts to redress inequality. He understood the deep fears held by some Australians, fears of the 'blacks' and the 'yellow peril', fears of being overwhelmed by hordes from the north.

To what extent did Howard use these resentments and fears in his electoral campaigning over the last twelve years? Race has been an issue in each of Howard's election victories. Was he addressing real problems, or was he simply fanning division to obtain electoral advantage?

## **Merchants of fear and loathing**

To assess the role of Howard's relationship with minority groups, we need to understand the techniques of Howard's election campaign managers, Mark Textor and Lynton Crosby. Textor has been Howard's chief market researcher for over a decade, covering four election wins, having learned his trade with the US Republicans' and with big business, such as the tobacco industry. In Australia he worked for Andrew Robb, Federal Director and Campaign Director of the Liberal Party in the 1990s. His business partner is Lynton Crosby, the current Campaign Director of the Liberal Party. Textor is a master at turning polling into votes.

Howard's big questions were: How do you get the support of the swinging uncommitted voter who may not be interested in politics? How do you get the support of those many people who carry resentments, those with racial fears, without appearing to be a racist yourself?

Textor brought from the United States the polling wizardry that Howard was looking for. He understood how to reassure those with resentments and racial prejudices that their attitudes were okay, while avoiding the use of overtly racist language.

The ABC's 'Background Briefing' became interested in Textor and his methods in 1999, and saw that he was doing something quite different from other pollsters.<sup>2</sup> Textor's key tool was market research in marginal seats. While working as a market researcher for the Northern Territory Country Liberal Party (CLP), Textor took a different approach from other researchers whose practice was to sample the entire population. He opted to talk only to white mainstream Australians. He wanted to investigate what these swinging voters thought, so that the CLP could do whatever it took to win their vote.

Textor had the research tools to penetrate 'soft voters' thinking and to map their underlying resentments. These resentments were his political capital; they provided the leverage he could use in a campaign. In the Northern Territory case, for instance, he identified dormant fears

that the government might institute one rule for blacks and another for whites. This was useful (even though there was little basis to the fear) because his campaign could imply that the Labor Party might introduce such laws if elected. The vast data he collected about the worries and local resentments of people in marginal seats was then rolled into his campaign strategy to fan these fears.

One such strategy, imported directly from the United States, was push-polling, which is a telemarketing technique that uses telephone calls to canvass potential voters. It feeds them false and damaging 'information' about an opposing candidate under the pretence of taking a poll to see how this 'information' affects the voter's choices. The intent is to 'push' the voter away from the candidate you are attacking towards your candidate.

Background Briefing found that Textor attempted to use push-polling in the Northern Territory election campaign of 1994. Typical questions asked in a so-called market research phone poll run to this pattern:

Would you change the way you vote if you knew that Mr xxx and his party plan to close the seas to recreational fishing as part of Aboriginal land rights if they win on Saturday?

Would you change the way you vote if you knew they plan to have two sets of laws: one for Aboriginals and one for non-Aboriginals?<sup>3</sup>

Typically, hypotheticals used by push-pollsters are invented. After receiving a push-poll call, the targeted voter is much less likely to vote for the candidate whom they now believe intends to make extreme changes if elected. Or a candidate whom they now find personally offensive because of the innuendo in the polling message. Thousands of such calls can turn an election result.

This was back in 1994. The UK's *Guardian* newspaper describes Textor as an:

unashamed promoter of wedge politics ... credited with putting anti-Aboriginal sentiment into the mainstream of Northern Territory politics at a time when the former One Nation leader

Pauline Hanson was still running a chip shop in southern Queensland.<sup>4</sup>

In another context, court action was brought against Textor and the Liberal's Andrew Robb for defamation in a push-polling campaign that targeted ACT Labor candidate, Sue Robinson. Their out-of-court settlement involved an apology and large payment to her.

Textor and Robb then drew back from push-polling. But push-polling is just one of the prongs in a strategy known as wedge politics. Wedge politics seeks to highlight and intensify division within communities in order to help political parties stay in power. It does this by building fears against the other, typically by attacking minorities. In its extreme form we end up with an Adolf Hitler.

Textor, Robb, and campaign director Lynton Crosby were the architects of Howard's victory in 1996. Robb, incidentally, was rewarded for his loyalty and is now Minister for Vocational and Further Education in the Howard government.

What is the morality of such methods? It would seem that Howard, Robb, Textor and Crosby all believe in the sly manipulation of voters and that when it comes to winning power, anything goes.

Once revealed, these tactics would shock many Australians, who do not believe it is acceptable to manipulate racial stereotypes and undermine social cohesion in order to win elections.

Could John Howard and his team really be deliberately fanning fear and division in order to hold on to power?

## **Campaigns Abroad**

The truly sinister nature of the Textor/Crosby program becomes apparent from their exploits in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. For much of what follows, I am indebted to the 2006 exposé by New Zealand journalist Nicky Hager, tellingly titled *Hollow Men: A study in the Politics of Deception*.<sup>5</sup>

In 2004, the Conservative Party leader in the UK, Michael Howard, appointed Lynton Crosby to lead his party's campaign against Labour

in the elections of that year. Mark Textor was part of the team. British commentators were on to their tactics early, naming their dirty game by noting that Crosby and Textor were advising Howard to use ‘immigration, asylum seekers, gypsies, law and order and abortion to exploit fear and prejudice to win votes.’<sup>6</sup>

The *Economist* did not disguise its disgust at these developments:

Over the past few weeks a new expression has entered the Westminster lexicon: dog-whistle politics. It means putting out a message that, like a high-pitched dog whistle is only fully audible to those to whom it is directly aimed. The intention is to make potential supporters sit up and take notice while avoiding offending those to whom the message will not appeal ... It seems likely that Lynton Crosby, the Tories’ Australian campaign director, is responsible for importing dog-whistle politics into Britain ...

Nothing that Mr [Michael] Howard ... said could be described as racist ... yet it is also true that racists, bigots and the millions of people who are neither of these things but whose fears are fanned daily by a mendacious press will have pricked up their ears and listened to a message aimed squarely at them. And just in case there was any question about whom and what the Tories were appealing to, Mr Howard issued his statement on gypsies astride a platform emblazoned with the party’s rather creepy campaign slogan ‘Are you thinking what I am thinking?’ Thinking, but not quite saying, in other words.<sup>7</sup>

What can we make of a strategy based on images of refugees and gypsies, captioned ‘Are you thinking what I am thinking’? It has echoes of pre-war Germany, except then it was Jews and gypsies. It’s hard to decide what is more vile: the sentiment or the cowardly refusal to own up to it.

Why would the British, who have such a strong democratic tradition, allow such practices to prosper, when democracy itself is at stake? The wholesale manipulation of voters through loaded, subliminal messages should not be allowed to continue unchallenged. The techniques of campaigners like Crosby and Textor have raced ahead of

law and public understanding. Is it time to review the laws that protect our democracy from such manipulation?

Crosby and Textor went on from their UK exploits to work for Don Brash, head of the conservative National Party in New Zealand, during his bid for power in the 2005 election. Despite being up against a popular and effective incumbent in Helen Clark, Brash very nearly won the day. In the process, though, his tactics caused revulsion, even amongst his own campaign team, leading to a major leak of party emails, which form the basis of Hager's exposé. Crosby and Textor are revealed in their true colours. Hager reports that:

[Crosby and Textor's] 'Strategic Memorandum' provides the first ever inside view into the techniques that have become standard practice in a series of Australian, British, American and New Zealand elections ... the Crosby/Textor [focus] groups ... revealed a deeper level of political manipulation.<sup>8</sup>

In this document, he goes on to explain, Crosby and Textor admit their research is designed:

to uncover ideas and persuasive creative leads ... The intention is to 'uncover' perceptions and feelings of which the people concerned may not be consciously aware – or even just potential perceptions and feelings – and find ways to use these 'persuasive creative leads' to influence groups of voters ...

Textor ... then reported on ideas that the focus group people had not raised, but about which 'once prompted', they had potentially been concerned. For instance, they were happy about the state of the economy, but once prompted were uncertain about whether Labour had a plan to keep the economy growing: 'no forward plan for the economy is a concern for voters, once prompted'. 'Herein ... lies an opportunity to use the economy to demonstrate in a practical way, what a lack of incentive in New Zealand means'. Crosby/Textor took this 'prompted concern' and used it to justify ... tax and welfare policies.

Crosby and Textor also used the New Zealand Labour government's commitment to minority group issues as the basis for a campaign

strategy proclaiming that the government was ‘distracted from important issues’ and too focused on ‘noisy minorities’ at the expense of ‘hard-working New Zealanders’. They recommended focusing on immigration and security; they suggested targeting the ‘special privileges’ of Indigenous New Zealanders.

It’s glaringly obvious that John Howard is singing from the same song sheet, especially when it comes to the chorus of racial stereotypes that inflame division and fan vague insecurities into all out racism.

Another important part of the Crosby/Textor technique is their use of reframing:

Textor explained that by ‘framing’ he meant ‘setting a notion not about the issues people think about, but giving them a WAY to think about the issues in question, that is, giving them a model or structure or equation.

Framing gives ‘indifferent voters a roadmap on how to think about issues and think about them on your terms’. For example, research told Textor that New Zealanders were opposed to tax cuts because their experience told them that tax cuts lead to significant losses in service. The Textor campaign reframed tax cuts as ‘incentives’. Constant repetition of the message linking tax cuts to ‘incentives’ helped break the old mindset that linked tax cuts with ‘loss of services’ and made soft voters more ready to embrace the Nationals’ tax-cut message.

Crosby and Textor also recommend making big, radical claims that are very bold, which then get ‘turbocharged’ by the strong reaction from those who oppose them. It’s the precise opposite of making yourself into a small target. One cannot help but think of the Tampa affair and its role in the 2004 election in Australia. Hager's conclusion is inescapable:

The Crosby/Textor-style campaign tactics may be manipulative but, as John Howard’s four wins in Australia demonstrate, they can work, by producing a short-term reaction from the so-called soft voters that can swing elections.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Home Front**

Howard believes he has a lot to gain by securing the ‘soft’ voter, ‘the undecided, uninformed, and indifferent’<sup>9</sup>. He figures that 30 per cent of the voting population belong to the Liberals, 30 per cent belong to Labor<sup>10</sup>, and a huge 40 per cent are soft voters. Attacks on minorities have proved to be an effective way of winning the votes of this last group; the prime minister and his men first inflame their fears. He then reassures them that he understands their unexpressed concerns, and is on their side. Whatever we think about the morality of the process, Textor, Crosby and Howard seem to be masters of this demographic group.

This context gives new coherence to some of Howard’s bold racially charged decisions. For example, one of the least-understood episodes of Howard’s first term in government is why he took so long to censure Pauline Hanson’s florid attack on Asians and Aborigines in her maiden speech in Parliament.

Referring to this episode some time later, Simon Crean (leader of the Opposition) was again forced to speak up for Australian values in the absence of prime ministerial leadership. He said:

National leaders have responsibilities to respond to these statements immediately and unequivocally; to speak up for the nation and the need for tolerance; not to promote division, blame or scapegoating.

His equivocation at the time of the rise of Hansonism showed what damage [can be] caused to the social fabric of the nation by poor leadership of this kind.<sup>11</sup>

There was consensus across politicians and commentators that Howard’s inaction was damaging social cohesion and the image of Australia in Asia. Was Howard just being a ditherer or was he experimenting with a new strategy? It was unclear at the time. Howard based his argument on freedom of speech when he said: ‘I mean, there is the pressure cooker principle – if you stifle debate you are far more likely to build up resentments than if you talk about things openly’.<sup>12</sup>

For thirty-five days, Howard remained silent on the issue except to defend free speech: ‘in a country such as Australia people should be able to say that’.<sup>13</sup>

Now it seems likely that he was testing the reach of ‘dog-whistle politics’, to see what it might turn up, to try the country’s tolerance for negative racial and ethnic stereotypes. For every one of those thirty-five days Howard was silently broadcasting a promise to protect those Australians who had quiet—or not so quiet—doubts and fears about other races. He let them know that it is okay to have some anti-Asian or anti-Aboriginal feelings. As a result these people were more likely to feel safe with him and vote for him.

What was Mark Textor doing at the time? We don’t know. But it is easy to imagine him hard at work with his focus groups taking the pulse of the soft voters, measuring how they were responding to Howard’s refusal to speak against Pauline Hanson. Judging from their subsequent tactics, they liked what they saw.

With Crosby and Textor, Howard went on to refine the dog-whistle strategy to such an extent that they can now be confident of winning the soft or swinging vote in most elections. The UK *Guardian*<sup>14</sup> reports that ‘in the 2001 elections it was Textor’s polling advice that crystallised [John] Howard’s decision to run a xenophobic scare campaign based on fear of immigrants and terrorism’. This campaign included the Tampa incident, children overboard and anti-refugee rhetoric.

Many Australians were flummoxed by Howard’s success. His treatment of Aboriginal issues, of migrants, and his lies about the children overboard affair did not damage him electorally. But Textor’s data predicted this outcome. He had identified what were ‘hot button’ issues and what were not. His research told him that voters were less concerned about who said what in the children overboard affair than they were about the economy, interest rates and terrorism. Whether these concerns were actual or merely ‘potential perceptions and feelings’, their campaign reinforced them and made them stronger by fanning underlying fears.

In mid 2006, Howard was at it again. The ultimate pragmatist, he found the most convenient minority label to use this time was 'Muslim'. Muslims, he suggested, would not integrate and failed to learn English. This is clearly absurd. Are Muslims slower at learning English than members of other faiths? Not so, according to the Australia Bureau of Statistics. Buddhists, Serbian Orthodox and Macedonian Orthodox are slower to learn English than are Muslims.<sup>15</sup>

Or take Howard's more recent backing of Alan Jones, who was found by the Australian Communications and Media Authority to have broken its Code of Practice by helping to incite the Cronulla riots in December 2005. In the very week before the riots Jones had suggested that they needed bikie gangs to come down to Cronulla to physically attack the Lebanese thugs. The Authority had found his comments were 'likely to encourage violence or brutality and to vilify people of Lebanese and Middle-Eastern backgrounds on the basis of ethnicity'.<sup>16</sup>

Howard publicly defended Jones' comments and stated: '... but he is a person who articulates what a lot of people think'.<sup>17</sup>

Here he is at it again with his dog-whistle politics, repeating the very same phrase he used so effectively with regard to Pauline Hanson a decade before. In the guise of defending free speech, Howard is reassuring the soft voters, dividing the community and undermining social cohesion.

Howard is all in favour of free speech when someone is saying what he himself would like to say but can't; however, don't count on it if your views are different from his. It's clear there are no moral principles being defended here; what we are witnessing is rank opportunism.

So why has Howard singled out Muslims? Why would he not take the chance to pour oil on troubled waters? Back in 2002, Donald Horne had a vision of how the task might be begun:

Imagine how John Howard could electrify us all by appearing on our television screens one night with two young Australian Muslims, one male, one female (in hijab), one on each side of

him, both talking with Aussie accents, while he reminds us how, despite religious differences, we are all brothers and sisters under the skin.<sup>18</sup>

You won't find Mark Textor recommending this scenario. He knows exactly why Howard needs to keep up the attack: it's because their campaign strategy requires scapegoats in order to win 'mainstream' Australia. Many Australians find Howard's behaviour towards minorities to be reprehensible and unAustralian, but he still manages to win the required votes.

## **Conclusion**

Other Australian political leaders have not been willing to use race and attacks on minorities in order to win votes. Howard, though, with the help of Textor and Crosby, has chosen this strategy as a core part of his electoral campaigning. Wedge politics, manipulation of voters, appealing to racial stereotypes, attacking minorities and undermining social cohesion, all offend basic Australian values.

Whose interests is John Howard serving here?

Howard's democracy is one where you can do whatever you can to win an election, even if this involves attacking and making scapegoats out of the innocent. Clearly Howard is being driven by self-interest. His appetite for power trumps every other consideration. Howard is playing a dirty game, and he should be called on it, every time, unequivocally.

Progressives within our society recognise that democracy works best when people are fully informed and not subject to manipulation. When our democratic system is being so abused, we need voters to better understand how they are being manipulated. And we need to consider whether we need new regulation to control such abuses.