

## **Misplaced marketing Misusing marketing in misleading voters**

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### **Abstract**

For countless centuries leaders have used external threats as a way of unifying their populations. In these currently troubled times, political marketers can be tempted to take the easy option of following (or even stimulating) uninformed emotion among their voters rather than assuming moral and intellectual leadership. This article describes a recent example of this and highlights the potential pitfalls of such an approach.

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Leaders throughout history have used the threat of foreign demons as a marketing communications tool to influence their populations. Early kings of England overcame domestic unpopularity by fighting frequent wars with the French and the Scots. In the current disturbing times it is of course important to recognise when unusual occurrences may indicate a potential threat. However we must be alert for signs of xenophobia -- an undue fear of that which is foreign -- and more directly, the amoral abuse of marketing as a replacement for leadership (Rotfeld, 2001).

In the case discussed here, a national election was won on the premise that Australia needed to be protected from uncontrolled hordes of refugees advancing on Australian shores (Jevons and Carroll, 2004). Matters known to be untrue were presented as fact; asylum seekers, although not charged with any crime, were branded "illegal" (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003). This demonisation of refugees, together with the then recent tragedy of September 11 in the USA, was largely responsible for a turnaround in voter sentiment and an unexpected victory for the hitherto deeply unpopular incumbent Government.

### **For example**

Refugees and other persons of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees amount to 0.3 per cent of the global population. Australia's 6100 asylum seekers a year is only 0.03 per cent of its population, and the total of 1,212 unauthorised boat arrivals in 2001-2002 amounts to the minuscule proportion of 0.0006 per cent of Australia's population of 20 million (UNHCR, 2003). It is doubtful whether this small proportion of boat 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.

During an election called soon after 11 September 2001 and the internationally known events in the USA, the Australian Government released a story that refugees on a sinking boat approaching Australia threw their children overboard, accusing the refugees of premeditation and of clearly planning the incident in order to force their way into the country. When challenged, the Government reiterated that the incident was an absolute fact, providing close-cropped photographs of children in the water taken by the Australian Navy to support the argument. Yet a post-election Senate Enquiry into the incident found that no children were thrown overboard: "The story was in fact untrue" (Australian Government, 2002, p. xxi). The photographic "evidence" was in fact taken after the boat had sunk and its human cargo was being rescued by



Navy personnel. The senior government ministers knew there were doubts about the report and photographs well before the election, but the doubts were denied until after the election on 10 November 2001.

The incumbent Government controlled the refugee issue for party political purposes right up to the election, including ignoring internationally accepted legal rights of refugee applicants, changed the borders of the country for refugee purposes to suit its agenda and paid impoverished Pacific island nations to act as detention centres (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003). To maintain public support for this strategy, press access to detainees was restricted and considerable resources invested in media advisors and public relations personnel. The Defence Minister's press secretary admitted to the Senate enquiry, under oath, that instructions had been given that no "personalising" or "humanising" stories of the boat people were allowed. Instead, frequent innuendo was made, unsupported by any evidence, that terrorists might be lurking among these refugees, and carefully selected words were used to describe these unfortunate people: "people of that type [who would throw their children overboard]", "queue jumpers", "waves" of "illegal immigrants".

As Archbishop Foley (1999) wrote, political marketing may "obstruct rather than facilitate the democratic process when it . . . appeals more to peoples' emotions than their intellects".

Following a marketing orientation, politicians in many democracies increasingly tend to follow rather than lead public opinion (Rotfeld, 2001). This is not a totally new idea. The political theory of Machiavelli advocated acting in harmony with the times, which included under extreme circumstances use of powers that at other times would be considered amoral. Enoch Powell, the politician who gained strong electoral support from racist elements in British society in the 1960s, said that he succeeded by crystallising what people thought, even though they did not express or even know it – what is now called "dog-whistle politics".

To many, the 2001 Australian election was an interesting example of the use of Powell's tactics, and raised Machiavellian issues of morality. The safety of Australia was not threatened by 1,212

unauthorised asylum seekers, but that the impression was successfully given during the election campaign that this just might have been the case. In fact, the greater threat to democracy comes from the abuse of marketing tactics by any government desperate for re-election.

Such strategies of political marketing exemplify the use of marketing tools and tactics for political gain, without consideration of the morality of their actions from a wider view of the interest of society as a whole. The government stimulated voter xenophobia and benefited from the misfortune of refugees to achieve its short-term partisan goal. Similar issues could readily arise in the 2004 Australian election, or elections in other nations, as the flow of refugees continues; tapping xenophobia as an election tool has been used by various leaders in the past, in all types of places. "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" was not actually spoken by a modern leader. The quotation is often credited to Adolf Hitler in his 1933 speech announcing the formation of the Gestapo.

Of course, it is absurd to suggest that Nazi principles are permeating society. Yet, the absurdity of the comparison of this odious regime to any modern democracy simply highlights the potential pitfalls of this approach to political marketing.

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