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Under the Radar

Dog-whistle politics in Australia

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Summary

Dog-whistle politics is the art of sending coded or implicit messages to a select group of voters while keeping others in the dark. Just as a dog whistle can be heard by dogs but not humans, a dog whistle in politics can be heard by some members of the electorate but not others. Its key feature is *plausible deniability*: the dog whistler can say ‘I didn’t mean that, I meant this instead’. And it is usually a divisive or reactionary message that it conceals, one that would risk offending or scandalising more tolerant voters.

Those who are not the intended audience of a dog whistle may just take it on face value and not perceive (or deliberately ignore) the layered or multiple meanings. This is what allows dog whistling to flourish and dog whistlers to get elected. But if the mass of evidence is assembled and considered carefully (as this paper sets out to do), it is difficult to deny that the phenomenon of dog whistling is real, and that it is a powerful political weapon, particularly in its country of origin, Australia.

The media plays an important part in channelling and amplifying dog-whistle politics. The scramble of the daily news cycle creates conditions under which apparently benign statements can easily evade critical attention. More importantly, there are a number of media commentators who consistently reinforce racial, religious and cultural intolerance, and who are regularly associated with certain politicians. As more active participants in the process than their usually well-meaning journalistic counterparts, these individuals are more directly implicated in the phenomenon of dog-whistle politics in Australia.

Dog-whistle politics often draws on *stock words or phrases* that refer to other, unspoken concepts – terms like the ‘Australian way of life’ and ‘political correctness’. But dog whistling comes in different forms: it can be an *implied association*, where claiming an explicit connection (say between asylum seekers and terrorism) would leave a politician open to the charge of prejudice or intolerance, or just plain error.

Another common method of dog whistling is to champion the cause of *free speech* when asked to comment on inflammatory statements made by other public figures. And in the right circumstances – where a leader is under pressure to denounce racist comments, for instance – even *silence* can constitute a dog whistle. In Australia, whole government programs have been established in order to send a certain message to voters rather than to achieve worthwhile policy objectives. The recently announced Australian Citizenship Test, which requires applicants to answer a series of questions about Australian history and culture, is a good example of such an initiative.

Politicians of all colours engage in ‘spin’; this is part of the modern political landscape. Yet the practice of dog whistling is very much aligned with the conservative side of politics, largely because the Left has embraced the language and ideals of pluralism, non-discrimination and social justice for minority groups. To take one example, conservative politicians have over recent years tried to present themselves as representing ordinary, hardworking people against a barrage of sectional interests and their claims for government assistance. In so doing, they have

fostered a sense of persecution in the community – the sense that the values and livelihoods of ‘ordinary, decent people’ are increasingly under threat, and that this situation is due to the unwarranted power of minority groups and the so-called ‘elites’. With constant repetition, terms like ‘elite’, ‘special interests’ and the ‘thought police’ have gained a resonance beyond their surface meaning, calling to mind divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that do not need to be explicitly enunciated to be understood. And once they take on meanings beyond the literal, these terms enter the realm of dog-whistle politics.

One explanation for the rise of dog-whistle politics in Australia is the rift between standards of propriety in public language and the views of many Australians. There are now laws proscribing racial vilification and discrimination on the basis of race, gender or sexuality, and public leaders are generally expected to refrain from making prejudiced comments and to respect cultural differences. However, these relatively new standards of public debate have outpaced voter sentiment, particularly on the issue of race. Some politicians want to have it both ways: to send a message of support to voters with racist leanings, but not to alienate those for whom an appeal to prejudice would be anathema. For these politicians, dog whistling is the tactic of choice.

Dog whistling is a problem because it undermines democracy. Clarity and directness are especially important in political communication, because voters are asked to decide which individual or party is best placed to represent their interests. Dog whistling works against clarity and directness; it allows politicians to send multiple and ambiguous messages to voters while denying that they are doing so. It makes use of deep-seated but often unspoken ideas about the nation, its people and its place in the world. Dog whistlers draw upon these ideas – usually only subtly or implicitly – in order to communicate meaningfully with voters who hold certain views about immigration, multiculturalism, welfare and Australian culture.

Over recent years, dog whistlers have been especially well-placed to exploit community concerns arising from overseas conflict and the threat of terrorism. They have also sought to create and inflame paranoia about minority groups and outsiders, and to taint the politics of immigration and Aboriginal affairs with parochialism and suspicion. But they have rarely done so explicitly, preferring to leave the task of interpretation to the target audience and to well-placed allies in the media.

In recent years, many concealed messages have slipped ‘under the radar’ without being subject to question. Will the next election be characterised once again by dog-whistle politics, or will politicians who say one thing but really mean another be held to account?

1. Introduction

*One notices, if one will trust one's eyes,
The shadow cast by language upon truth.*

W.H. Auden, 'Kairos and Logos' (1941)

1.1 What is dog whistling?

In early 2005, as the British Conservative Party leader Michael Howard faced annihilation by Tony Blair's Labour Party in the upcoming general election, he asked an Australian political strategist to come to Britain and manage his campaign. Lynton Crosby, a former Federal Director of the Liberal Party of Australia, had been instrumental to the Coalition victories in 1996, 1998 and 2001, and the Conservatives hoped he could repeat those performances on their behalf.

Crosby brought with him a distinctive approach to electioneering, one which was neatly summed by the Tories' slogan: 'Are you thinking what we're thinking?' Michael Howard decided to focus on the issue of immigration, just as his namesake had done during the 2001 Australian election. The Tories' campaign manifesto declared that 'It's not racist to impose limits on immigration,' a line repeated by Howard throughout the campaign (Freeland 2005). On the face of it this was true: virtually every country in the world regulates immigration, and Britain had done so for many decades. But some observers suspected that there was something deeper at work here.

Political commentators soon put a name to this phenomenon: 'dog-whistle' politics. Crosby himself is credited with introducing the term to Britain (Freeland 2005), although it had been in use for almost a decade in Australia (Stetekee 1997). It refers to a message that only some people can hear: just as a dog whistle is audible to dogs but not to humans, a dog whistle in politics is heard and understood by some members of the electorate but not others. In Michael Howard's case, it was pitched at a subsection of the Conservatives' core constituency, those who might begin a sentence with 'I'm not racist, but...'. It harked back to a time when British politicians – most famously the idiosyncratic Conservative Enoch Powell – could loudly declare their suspicion of foreigners and get away with it. But in 2005, these kinds of sentiments needed to be articulated more carefully.

In its country of birth, Australia, dog-whistle politics is alive and well. In fact, some senior members of the federal Coalition Government are masters of this dark political art. As this paper shall reveal, a dog whistle doesn't even need to be a word or a phrase; in the right circumstances, maintaining a conspicuous silence as others make bigoted remarks can qualify as a dog whistle. As our politicians learn more and more ways to *say one thing and mean another*, it is important that Australians learn to recognise when our leaders are appealing to our baser instincts.

1.2 Does dog whistling really exist?

Over the last two or three decades, it has become increasingly difficult for public figures to make prejudiced remarks without risking public outcry. Laws have been enacted to prohibit unfair discrimination, and our political and cultural institutions have distanced themselves from racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of prejudice. But many members of the community still harbour resentments based on race, religion or sexuality. And these people vote.

In fact race, more than many other issues, cuts across traditional political boundaries, so there is a real incentive for political leaders to make policy and frame messages that appeal to racial prejudices latent in the community (Jackman 1998). Immigration, multiculturalism, law and order, and welfare – issues that are often exploited for their racial or cultural dimensions – are vote-changers. They excite emotion, and can secure the crucial swinging vote in a tight election. Other, ‘drier’ issues like health, education and the economy are sometimes just so many facts and figures, without the emotive appeal for those people whose votes are up for grabs.

But our politicians don’t want to alienate members of their constituency who might be put off by blatantly prejudiced remarks. It is important that they communicate in ways that both resonate with the target audience (such as people who harbour suspicions about certain minority groups) and are inaudible to voters who hold more progressive views. Dog whistling is therefore the tactic of choice for a politician who wants to have it both ways.

Because a dog whistle by definition is always ambiguous, one cannot always be certain that one or another utterance (or policy) is an appeal to prejudice. If you are not the intended audience of a dog whistle, you might just take it on face value and not perceive (or deliberately ignore) the layered or multiple meanings. This is what allows dog whistling to flourish and dog whistlers to get elected. But if the mass of evidence is assembled and considered carefully (as this paper sets out to do), it is difficult to deny that the phenomenon of dog whistling is real, and that it is a powerful political weapon in Australia and other countries.

Of course, human beings habitually use metaphors to express themselves, and have done so throughout history. Mightn’t our leaders simply be deploying their considerable rhetorical skills, as politicians have done for thousands of years? In a way, yes. But certain metaphors can be dangerous if used unwisely (consider Mao’s ‘cultural revolution’ or Hitler’s appeal to *Volksgemeinschaft*); they mask the truth of the matter and profoundly distort people’s understanding. In a modern democracy, it is not unreasonable to demand that our politicians speak openly and honestly and that they seek to uphold enlightened values, rather than fostering intolerance and appealing to the uglier side of human nature.

1.3 Outline

This paper is a study of dog-whistle politics in its many forms. Although it concentrates mainly on Australian politics, some salient examples from overseas are discussed. Since modern political practice is so fixated on the mass media, the role of the media in dog whistling is also considered.

Section 2 presents a detailed history and theory of the phenomenon of dog whistling. It investigates the etymology of the term, provides a working definition, and sets out the different forms that dog whistling can take. It also considers the role that pervasive metaphors, such as Australia's national mythologies, play in political communication.

Section 3 documents some real instances of dog whistling, and provides 'translations' of the hidden meanings carried by otherwise benign statements, so that readers can experience how dog-whistle politics works in practice.

Section 4 puts dog whistling in context, by discussing what implications it has for democracy and considering how the 'politics of inclusion' has been used to manipulate Australian voters. It also examines how notions of 'national security' and 'border protection' have formed the basis of dog-whistle politics in recent times.

Section 5 examines the media's part in communicating political ideas and the extent to which it is implicated in the practice of dog whistling.

Section 6 provides some conclusions about dog-whistle politics in Australia, based on the evidence gathered in this paper.

2. A history and theory of dog whistling

*And thus I clothe my naked villainy
With old odd ends stolen out of holy writ,
And seem a saint when most I play the devil.*

William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (c. 1591)

2.1 Etymology and usage

The dog whistle was invented in the middle of the 19th Century by English polymath Francis Galton, who coincidentally (but intriguingly) was also a founder of the eugenics movement. Designed to produce sounds higher than 20,000Hz, a dog whistle can be heard by dogs but not by humans.

Australians were apparently the first to use the term *dog whistle* in its political sense (that is, to denote a concealed message sent by politicians to certain voters but not others). The term gained currency in Australia around the time that John Howard was first elected Prime Minister in 1996. Its first appearance in print seems to have been in March 1997 (Steketee 1997), although the term had been in use in political circles before that (Safire 2005). The phrase *dog-whistle politics* was first used in the Australian parliament by Labor MP Martin Ferguson in July 1998 (Australia 1998a). It was also picked up by New Zealand journalists writing about Australian politics (The Dominion 1997).

As a term describing a distinct political phenomenon, *dog whistle* came into its own in the lead-up to the 2001 federal election, as journalists scrambled to put a name to the politics surrounding *Tampa* and the ‘children overboard’ scandal (Oakes 2001; Ramsey 2001; Seccombe 2001). The term spread overseas around 2005, with British and American commentators using it to describe political developments in Britain and the United States (*The Economist* 2005; Safire 2005).

Dog whistle has also been used in other metaphorical senses, although with little consistency. In an early instance, a 1988 article about political polling in *The Washington Post* identified what it called the ‘dog whistle effect’, where respondents to a political survey ‘hear something in the question that researchers do not’ (Morin 1988). *Dog whistling* has also been applied to advertising techniques that make use of subtle cues to catch the attention of a niche audience. For example, some television commercials for Subaru vehicles are apparently sprinkled with delicate references to the sexuality of Subaru (or ‘Lesbaru’) drivers (Shearer Palmer 2000).¹ While no doubt interesting in themselves, these alternative meanings of the term *dog whistle* are rare and are not considered at any more length in this paper.

¹ The developer of Subaru’s campaign – which used the slogan ‘It’s Not a Choice, It’s the Way We’re Built’ – says that ‘It’s apparent to gay people that we’re talking about being gay, but straight people don’t know what’s going on’ (Shearer Palmer 2000).

2.2 A working definition

The *Double-Tongued Dictionary* (which ‘records undocumented or under-documented words from the fringes of English’) defines dog-whistle politics as ‘a concealed, coded, or unstated idea, usually divisive or politically dangerous, nevertheless understood by the intended voters’ (Double-Tongued Dictionary 2007).

Dog-whistling doesn’t need to appeal to base prejudices, although it often does. The key feature of a dog-whistle is *plausible deniability*. A politician can say ‘I didn’t mean that, I meant this instead.’ Because of its deniability, it is worth thinking about what message the target audience ends up hearing and interpreting, not what the dog-whistler claims was the original intention of the remark – a point taken up later in this section.

As this paper will demonstrate, Prime Minister John Howard is the master of dog-whistle politics, in that the subtext or hidden meanings of his comments are often so eminently *deniable*. A Coalition backbencher once told a journalist that John Howard ‘has such mastery of the language that he can frame sentences that appear to say one thing while allowing the listener to interpret the words in another way.’ According to this (anonymous) MP, ‘It is often very difficult to nail him because of his ability to sound reasonable. He is so very persuasive’ (Wright 2000).

A dog whistle is ambiguous, but not ambiguous in the same way that other statements by politicians can be. It is not meant to obscure the truth completely (like so many statements by politicians), but to *enlighten a select audience* while keeping others in the dark as to its real meaning. That audience often consists of those people who are likely to harbour feelings under the surface that a dog whistle can tap into. For example, there is evidence that the politics of ‘anti-elitism’ (discussed in Section 4) are most effective with blue-collar workers who ‘express a high level of political alienation, maintain hardline views about social policies and prefer lower immigration’ (Wilson and Breusch 2004, p. 177).

That said, the target audience for a dog whistle can be any group to whom politicians want to send a message without alerting others, or at least without alarming them. Different groups have different ways of seeing the world, and sometimes have systems of knowledge that are specific to them. Dog whistling therefore sometimes makes use of *codes*. If the dog whistle is done well, only the target audience has the cipher to crack the code, while those on the outside remain oblivious.

A much-cited example of this phenomenon is President George W. Bush’s use of arcane – but seemingly everyday – turns of phrase derived from biblical texts in order to signal his allegiance to America’s religious right. For example, Bush’s acceptance speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention included mention of ‘hills to climb’ and seeing ‘the valley below’, an allusion to the Israelites’ flight from Egypt and Moses’ vision of the Promised Land, described in Deuteronomy 34 (Lincoln 2005). Bush’s speechwriter, Michael Gerson, defends the president’s frequent use of scriptural language, saying: ‘They’re literary references understood by millions of Americans. They’re not code words; they’re our culture.’ Yet the select audience targeted by such messages is clearly those for whom these kinds of allusions have a biblical resonance. ‘Just because some people don’t get it doesn’t mean it’s a plot or

secret’, says Gerson (Gerson 2004). As we will see, deniability is imperative to successful dog whistling.

There doesn’t need to be a formal set of codes for a dog whistle to work. As with Michael Howard’s ‘Are you thinking what we’re thinking?’ the message can simply be *implicit*, and therefore completely deniable. In certain cases the message could even be *subliminal* – that is, below the level of consciousness. To take an Australian example, a NSW Liberal Party television advertisement during the 2007 state election campaign focussed on three Labor ministers of Italian background. Dubbed the ‘three wogs’ advertisement, the ad made them look like characters from *The Sopranos*, with all the connotations of corruption that the Italian mafia association implies (Gould 2007).

These, then, are the common features of dog-whistle politics: deniability; a select target audience; and coded, implicit or subliminal communication. Many more characteristics of dog-whistle politics will be spelled out in this paper, but these are its fundamental traits. Before describing the different forms that dog whistling can take, it is worthwhile distinguishing dog whistling from some other, related political phenomena.

Doublespeak is language that is deliberately designed to disguise or distort the truth, usually through over-the-top metaphors or technical jargon. Prominent examples include the term ‘collateral damage’, used to describe civilian deaths as a result of military action, or ‘rationalisation’ as a euphemism for large-scale corporate sackings. Although doublespeak is often deliberately ambiguous, and is a common feature of modern political communication (especially when bad news needs to be delivered), it is *universally* ambiguous: we are all confused, or annoyed, when we listen to doublespeak. If it starts to mean different things to different audiences, if some of those meanings are controversial or divisive, and if the controversial meanings are deniable, then doublespeak becomes dog whistling.²

Wedge politics is a direct and overt attempt to divide one’s political opponents on a given issue and in so doing to reap political or electoral benefit. In the United States, abortion is an extremely sensitive topic that is regularly used to ‘wedge’ opponents who (on both sides of politics) might include both ‘pro-choice’ and ‘pro-life’ individuals. In Australia, environmental issues are sometimes used by conservative politicians to ‘wedge’ the Left – that is, to divide younger, environmentally-conscious voters from the Labor Party’s traditional union powerbase. Wedge politics is often quite obvious (even if it doesn’t go by that name), and it is a powerful political tactic. When a wedge is *covert* – when it is not immediately apparent that different constituencies are being sent different messages – then it is a dog whistle, and is arguably even more powerful.

² The term *doublethink* refers to the holding of two contradictory ideas at the same time, and was first used in George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Although lexically related to *doublethink* (as well as the Orwellian term *newspeak*), *doublespeak* is not simply the articulation of *doublethink* (and does not appear in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*).

2.3 Types of dog whistling

A dog whistle doesn't need to be a word or a phrase; it can in fact take various forms. Some of the more common types are described below.

Stock phrases

There are certain words and phrases that are regularly used in dog-whistle politics. They include, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

- Ordinary, sensible people/Australians
- Mainstream Australia
- The Australian way of life
- Australian values
- The Judeo-Christian heritage/tradition
- Vested interests/special interests
- The elites
- The guilt industry
- Political correctness
- The thought police
- The black armband view of history
- Practical reconciliation
- Illegal immigrants
- Queue-jumpers
- Border protection
- Cut and run.

Of course, the meaning of any phrase ultimately depends on the context in which it is used, and these terms will not always activate a hidden meaning; that is, they are not dog whistles every time they are uttered. Nevertheless, in the right hands these seemingly innocuous phrases take on altogether more sinister connotations. A dictionary of such terms, 'translated' so as to make explicit some of their hidden meanings, is presented in Appendix A.

Implied associations

A dog whistler can imply that there is an association between two concepts simply by placing these alongside one another, without explicitly linking them. They may do this because they wish to create an impression that there is a connection where there is no evidence to support such a claim. They may also choose to *imply* a connection because to claim one *explicitly* would leave them open to the charge of prejudice or intolerance, or just plain error.

One notorious example is President George W. Bush's constant references to al-Qaeda in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. This led many Americans – as many as 69 per cent – to believe that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, according to a poll by *The Washington Post*, even though the Bush administration never asserted this directly

(AAP 2003). It was therefore able to deny that it had misled the American public over the justification for the invasion of Iraq.

In Australia, as in the United States, the ‘war on terror’ has been regularly linked to immigration and asylum seeker issues, but usually only implicitly or by association. Section 4 considers in detail how this was achieved, and how politicians have appealed to base prejudice and discouraged compassion by fostering fear of foreigners.

Championing free speech

When controversial statements are made by public figures, there is often pressure on political leaders to respond. If such statements are also racist or bigoted, there is an expectation that they will denounce these sentiments unequivocally. However, sometimes this kind of situation provides an opportunity for politicians to dog whistle to those members of the community who hold similarly prejudiced views.

The way a dog whistle is ‘blown’ in these circumstances can vary, but often it takes the form of an appeal to free speech and democratic principles. For example, when asked about Christian Democrats leader Fred Nile’s call for a ban on Muslim women wearing full traditional robes in public (because they might be concealing a weapon), Prime Minister Howard’s response included the following comment: ‘I like Fred, and I don’t always agree with him, but you know, Fred speaks for the views of a lot of people’ (ABC 2002a). Rather than repudiating his comments outright, Howard chose to emphasise the support that Nile enjoyed in the community.

Another example of this kind of dog whistling occurred during the controversy over Senator Bill Heffernan’s accusation under parliamentary privilege that Justice Michael Kirby, an openly gay judge of the High Court, ‘trawled for rough trade’ at a pick-up spot for male prostitutes (Haslem 2002). When asked by the Opposition about the matter in parliament, the Prime Minister defended Heffernan, declaring that ‘the senator in question enjoys both my affection and my friendship, and I know that he holds the views that he expresses on matters very deeply and very conscientiously’ (Australia 2002, p. 1162-3). It was only when the evidence upon which Heffernan was relying turned out to be forged that Howard demanded his resignation. Marion Maddox suggests that ‘we can read Howard’s backing of Heffernan as a timely reminder to social conservatives that he supports their agenda and is willing to continue to front it’ (Maddox 2005, p. 99). In other words, Howard’s reluctance to condemn Heffernan’s outrageous slur on Justice Kirby’s reputation, and his support for the Senator’s ‘principled stand’, was a dog whistle targeted at those members of the community who object to gay people holding public office.

Silence

As noted, political leaders are expected to respond to contentious statements made by other public figures. If there is a hint of racial controversy to the issue, then another tactic open to the dog whistler is silence. Strange as it may seem, conspicuous silence sends a clear message in the right circumstances.

A well-known instance where silence sent a strong signal to the electorate occurred in the wake of Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to the Australian parliament. Hanson caused an uproar with her declaration that 'we are in danger of being swamped by Asians,' along with her call for an end to 'the policy of multiculturalism' (Australia 1996, pp. 3862 & 3). Prime Minister John Howard's response to Hanson's sudden rise to prominence was to refuse to discuss openly her ideas for some months, even when specifically asked for comment (Manne 2004). His oblique reference to the changing political circumstances at the time was a classic dog whistle: 'One of the great changes that have come over Australia in the last six months is that people do feel free to speak a little more freely and a little more openly about what they feel. In a sense the pall of censorship on certain issues has been lifted' (quoted in Manne 2004, p. 16).

Of course, interpreting silence to be a dog whistle – rather than something indicating the priority a politician gives to one or another issue – can be subjective and context-dependent. To assert that the *absence of comment* carries any meaning is to admit that there is sometimes no 'smoking gun' that would betray the dog-whistler. Nevertheless, its exceptional deniability makes silence an extremely effective political tactic in certain situations.

Whole policies and programs

Sometimes government policy doesn't work as it is supposed to. Programs designed to meet certain objectives don't end up doing so, or they have negative unintended consequences. This is a fact of life that most people, and most politicians, would generally acknowledge.

What is less often recognised is that some government policies and programs are not intended to 'work', at least in the conventional sense. For these initiatives, the primary purpose is not to meet a set of worthwhile objectives, but to send a message of some kind to the electorate. Meanwhile, politicians and government officials will deny that there is an ulterior purpose, arguing that these policies have been put in place in order to meet official objectives. And because their real intent is *deniable*, such policies fit our definition of a dog whistle. Here are some initiatives of the current Australian Government which would appear to have more to do with electoral manipulation than meeting their stated objectives.

- Applicants for Australian citizenship are required to sit the *Australian Citizenship Test* in order to demonstrate 'a basic knowledge of the English language, adequate knowledge of Australia and the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship, and an understanding of the nature of their application' (DIC 2007). This curious policy is discussed further below.
- Under the *Flagpole Funding Initiative*, 'a condition of Australian Government general funding to schools is that all schools have a functioning flagpole flying the Australian flag'. The Department of Education, Science and Training's 'recognition requirements' for new flagpoles stipulate that 'Australian Government assistance should be acknowledged with a plaque, through a newsletter to the local school community and/or by providing an opportunity for an Australian Government representative to attend a flag raising ceremony at the school' (DEST 2007a).

- The *Values Education in Schools Program* aims to make ‘values a core part of schooling’ (DEST 2007b). The *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (DEST 2005) lists nine values for Australian schooling, including ‘care and compassion’, ‘doing your best’ and ‘a fair go’ (p.4). The promotion of ‘Australian values’ in schools could be seen in the context of Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop’s claim that public school students are held hostage to ‘Maoist’ ideology peddled by state education bureaucracies (Topsfield 2006).
- The *National Security Campaign* booklet, sent to all Australia households in February 2003, encouraged Australians to ‘be alert but not alarmed’ about the possibility of a terrorist incident on home soil. It included a fridge magnet with contact details for the 24-hour National Security Hotline, so that voters could be constantly reminded in their homes about the terrorist threat. This \$15 million ‘information campaign’ resulted in many people sending their fridge magnets back to the government (Guerrera and Miller 2003).

In all these examples, the substantive achievements resulting from well-designed public policy are plainly outweighed by the political dividends associated with sending a certain kind of message to the electorate.

2.4 Intention versus interpretation

As we have seen, one of the key features of dog whistling is deniability. The dog whistler can protest that, however the message was interpreted by others, the intention was perfectly above board. If he or she is adept, the denial will seem plausible, even natural.

Deniability can take different forms, just as dog whistling can come in different guises. As we have already seen, a dog whistle doesn’t need to be a word or phrase, merely an implicit message. If its primary (but unstated) purpose is to appeal to prejudice rather than achieve a desirable outcome in the community’s interest, a whole policy or program can in essence be a form of dog-whistle politics. It is doubtful whether the Australian Citizenship Test will result in more harmonious relations between recent migrants and native-born Australians. However, this initiative functions very well as a dog whistle to those Australians who believe that people of other language and cultural backgrounds are not integrated into ‘mainstream’ culture to a sufficient degree.

The elusive nature of some dog-whistle politics raises some interesting questions. If its essence is deniability, then how do we know for sure that any given utterance is a deliberate dog whistle? Might we not give our politicians the benefit of the doubt, and accept that they are not necessarily sending coded or implicit messages aimed at inflaming the prejudices of certain voters? Might not some statements simply be spontaneous remarks made in the cut and thrust of politics? We cannot know for sure, because a dog whistler will never own up to their real intentions.

Fortunately, there is evidence that politicians sometimes deliberately set out to use words and phrases that allow them to deny their more sinister intentions. In 2004, a confidential memo to the Republican Party was leaked to the American media.

Entitled ‘Communicating the Principles of Prevention & Protection in the War on Terror’, it was written by Frank Luntz, the pollster and political consultant famous for helping the Republicans cast doubt on the science of ‘global warming’ and steer the public towards the more benign term ‘climate change’ (ABC 2005; Yurica 2005).³ The document includes the following exhortation:

This is not a war of religion but a war against those with ‘*radical political ideologies*’. This has rightfully been part of the Administration’s playbook since the days immediately following September 11th. This is not a war against Islam. Extracting religion from the equation and emphasizing the ‘*shared radical ideology*’ in support of the fall of Western culture has layered effectiveness. First, you inoculate yourself from criticisms that you are motivated by religious bigotry. Second, it allows you to challenge ALL those who use violence as a political weapon (Luntz 2004, p. 4).⁴

Apart from revealing the extent to which modern political language is carefully calculated and pre-packaged, this passage is interesting because it provides a glimpse into the true nature of dog whistling. In a document designed to help Republican politicians justify the war in Iraq, we find detailed instructions on how they can appeal to ‘religious bigotry’ in the American community while being able to plausibly deny that they are doing so.

It comes as no surprise to even the casual observer that politicians of all persuasions (and their minders) regularly put ‘spin’ on important issues so as to highlight the positives and downplay the negatives for their respective political positions. The urge to ‘spin’ has recently become institutionalised in Australian politics, with ministerial advisers gaining unprecedented power over how issues are presented to the electorate (Ester 2007). Dog whistling is different to the regular or ‘everyday’ spin peddled by politicians, however, because it carries both *overt* and *covert* meanings, which change according to who is doing the interpreting. In the example above, the overt meaning makes reference to ‘radical ideologies’, while the covert meaning appeals to ‘religious bigotry’ in connoting a ‘war against Islam’.

Because of the inherent deniability of a dog whistle, it is just as important to focus on *what the audience hears* in addition to *what the speaker says was meant*. In other words, *interpretation* and *intention* are equally significant. We cannot know for sure what a politician intended with one or another remark, but we can consider how they *might* be interpreted – that is, the range of possible meanings – in the broader cultural context.

Sometimes a dog whistle goes wrong, losing its deniability and becoming transparent to all. This can be amusing or horrifying, depending on the circumstances. One incident with an element of both occurred during the 2005 UK general election, when Shadow Immigration Minister Humphrey Malins distributed different leaflets to constituents of different ethnic backgrounds. Asian voters received a leaflet written in Urdu describing Malins’s strong record in helping visa applicants; white voters,

³ Luntz later distanced himself from the Republican Party’s environmental policies, declaring that ‘I ... have changed my point of view and you will see across the globe that people now have come to accept that there is an issue here’ (quoted in ABC 2005).

⁴ Emphasis in original.

meanwhile, were given material in English promising to ‘substantially reduce’ immigration. His opponent subsequently accused him of having a ‘split personality’ (*Sunday Mirror* 2005). Whatever his psychological disposition, Malins’s attempt to send different messages to different members of his electorate – to dog whistle on immigration – was betrayed by the ineptitude of his approach.

2.5 The role of metaphor in political communication

Because dog-whistle politics is the propagation of veiled messages to select voters, it is worth considering what makes implicit rather than direct communication possible in the first place. In other words, how can *we say one thing and mean another* and be understood as we intended? In an important way, the answer has to do with how we use and understand metaphor.

The importance of metaphor

It is an everyday feature of human life that we communicate using metaphors – that is, using signs or symbols to represent other objects or ideas. In fact, many of the words that make up our modern language have their roots in, or are comprised of, metaphors drawn from related concepts or from other languages (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). When a metaphor is widely used it can become part of the very fabric of the language, or a ‘dead metaphor’, to use George Orwell’s term (Orwell 1946).

While some might associate ‘metaphor’ with the flowery language of literature, in its broadest sense a metaphor is simply a conceptual tool that we use to understand one concept in terms of another. While it is also a handy tool for the poet or the rhetorician, in truth we all use metaphorical language to break down complicated or inconsistent ideas into more manageable parts for easier comprehension.

The study of metaphor is a huge field, straddling linguistics, cognitive psychology, epistemology, semiotics and literary studies.⁵ It is not the purpose of this paper to delve deeply into theories of metaphor in order to relate them to political practice. However, it is worthwhile distinguishing some different types of metaphor so as to shed light on the art of political communication.

Importantly, metaphors operate on different levels. *Surface metaphors* are more or less ‘isolated’ instances of metaphorical language, used to explain or add colour to an idea or an argument. One might call one’s grandmother *a spring chicken*, or pass a test *with flying colours*. Surface metaphors usually work better when they are fresh – that is, when their very novelty aids understanding or appreciation. With use, a surface metaphor can fade into the background and appear unremarkable; in this situation, it becomes either ‘dead metaphor’ (i.e. a regular component of the language) or cliché. For instance, we all know what it means for a person to *have a meltdown* or why it is bad that *the housing bubble burst*, whereas *the information superhighway* is now a hackneyed term belonging to the late 1990s.

⁵ For example, see *Words and Rules: the Ingredients of Language* by Stephen Pinker (1999), *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* by Paul de Man (1979), *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* by Umberto Eco (1984) and *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* by John B. Carroll (ed) (1997).

Metaphors can also operate below the surface of language and influence the way we think. *Conceptual metaphors* draw on particular ways of understanding that may not be immediately obvious in the actual language used. Deeply rooted in human cognition, conceptual metaphors allow us to think – and talk – about a particular subject or idea in a coherent and consistent way. For example, the metaphorical concept ‘time is money’ – alternatively characterised as ‘time is a resource’ and ‘time is valuable commodity’ – is a pervasive one in contemporary English.

You’re *wasting* my time.
 This gadget will *save* you hours.
 How do you *spend* your time these days?
 That flat tire *cost* me an hour.
 I’ve *invested* a lot of time in her.
 You need to *budget* your time.
 Is that *worth your while*?
 He’s living on *borrowed* time.
 You don’t *use* your time *profitably* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, pp. 7-8).

There are many such examples of how conceptual metaphors structure and define the way we habitually think about things on an everyday basis. According to Stephen C. Pepper, a philosopher who developed the idea of the root metaphor (closely related to that of the conceptual metaphor): ‘Not only are the great traditional systems caught up in the action of metaphorical interpretations, but the cultural concepts and institutions dominating the beliefs and values of ordinary men are impregnated with them’ (Pepper 1973). The idea of a conceptual metaphor is related to what is known (in various academic disciplines or in the popular conception) as a ‘paradigm’, a ‘frame’ (or ‘frame of reference’), or a ‘schema’. Unlike surface metaphors, conceptual metaphors usually work because they are familiar to many (perhaps in a subconscious way), having been reinforced in different contexts. It is their *commonality* that allows conceptual metaphors to be such a powerful basis for the communication of ideas.

Framing

Ideas about conceptual metaphors have been taken up and extended into the political arena by the American cognitive linguist George Lakoff, who has argued that powerful yet often subconscious ideas about government and its role in society can explain how people interpret political issues in very different ways, even to the point of circumventing rational argument or contradictory evidence (Lakoff 1996; Lakoff 2004). Lakoff refers to the process of drawing on deep-seated metaphorical conceptions of the world as *framing*, and to the conceptual metaphors involved as *frames*.

Drawn from a wider debate within the field of psychology (Nelson and Kinder 1996), framing is a somewhat recent term to describe an old but significant idea: namely, that the way in which an issue is presented, including the language used and the concepts it draws upon, has a major influence on how people think about that issue. Frames are especially important in the context of politics and government because policy issues are often more complicated than the average person can be expected to comprehend. ‘Because frames permeate public discussion of politics,’ observe Nelson and Kinder (1996, p.1058), ‘they in effect teach ordinary citizens how to think about and

understand complex social policy problems. When frames suggest what the essence of an issue is, they provide a kind of mental recipe for preparing an opinion.’

Lakoff argues that there are two broad sets of frames which permeate political debate in the United States, each drawn from different conceptions of the family.

Conservative (or Republican) political opinion, says Lakoff, is based on a ‘strict father family’, while liberal (or Democratic) political views are based on a ‘nurturant parent family’. Generally speaking, the language used by either side of politics is in turn drawn from the (conceptual) metaphor of the family which each uses to comprehend or explain difficult (and even contradictory) political issues (Lakoff 2004).

To illustrate these ideas, Lakoff presents the ‘strict father family’ worldview as follows:

The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good. What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can protect the family in the dangerous world ... and teach his children right from wrong (Lakoff 2004, p. 7).

This model of the family, argues Lakoff, is a deeply pervasive frame or conceptual metaphor for many people’s thinking about the state and the role of government, particularly those on the conservative side of politics. By contrast, progressives or liberals ascribe to a political philosophy that draws on the ‘nurturant parent family’ model:

Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children ... Children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents’ job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others (Lakoff 2004, p. 12).

According to Lakoff, these alternative models help to explain divergent views on a whole range of policy issues, including taxation, welfare, national security, foreign policy, healthcare, the provision of social services, and even such ‘moral’ issues as abortion and gay marriage. His examination of language from both sides of politics yields countless examples of the ways in which the different conceptual metaphors of the family influence how policy issues are talked about.

Whether Lakoff’s underlying models for explaining how political debate is framed are as pervasive as he claims, and whether these models could equally apply to politics in other parts of the world (including Australia), are questions that remain open.

Nevertheless, his ideas about framing and the way that conceptual metaphors influence political debate are highly relevant to our consideration of dog-whistle politics, because they reveal how messages can be conveyed in *implicit* rather than *explicit* ways. By framing debate in certain ways and deliberately drawing on well-recognised metaphors, politicians and other people who engage in political discourse

can activate certain ways of making sense of policy and politics, regardless of whether the actual language used reflects the deep-seated ideas in question. In fact, politics can usefully be thought of as a contest between different *frames* on any given issue.

Of course, frames don't need to draw on Lakoff's metaphor of the 'nation as family'. A more traditional or standard conception would see 'the political right as having a tragic vision, in which human nature is permanently afflicted by limitations of knowledge, wisdom, and virtue, and the political left as having a utopian vision, in which human nature is naturally innocent, but corrupted by defective social institutions, and perfectible by reformed ones' (Pinker 2007, p. 61). Whatever the issue, there are sure to be deeper narratives informing the terms of the debate, and these are ultimately what constitute the real contest of ideas. As Nelson and Kinder (1996, p. 1058) observe: 'Elites wage a war of frames because they know that if *their* frame becomes the dominant way of thinking about a particular problem, then the battle for public opinion has been won.'

Pervasive frames in Australian politics

As we have argued, the best dog whistles are in fact the most *deniable* – that is, the most ambiguous or the least explicit (while still managing to convey the intended message). Taking this to its logical conclusion, it could be argued that dog whistling at its *most* adept cannot be detected – that it truly goes 'under the radar'. These signals are 'silent' to all, because they draw on deep, subconscious narratives (or conceptual metaphors), and do so without calling attention to how they are doing so. They are what President Bush's speechwriter was attempting to describe when he said: 'They're not code words, they're our culture' (Gerson 2004). Indeed, some of the most prolific conceptual metaphors in Australian politics are those that draw upon one or another interpretation of Australian history and culture.

For example, some politicians are fond of talking about 'mainstream Australia', which consists of 'ordinary, decent people' who hold 'common sense views'. These terms can serve to activate a particular frame, one that could be described as follows.

There is a 'mainstream' that represents the real Australia. This mainstream embodies 'Australian values', and stands in opposition to minority groups and vested interests. The mainstream believes in a 'fair go', whereas vested interests seek to advance their cause by benefit of their special status or identity. The cause of the vested interests is advanced by the inner-city elites, who don't understand the lives of ordinary people and seek to censor any real discussion about the vested interests.

Right-wing media commentators (whose role in dog-whistle politics is discussed at more length in Section 5) are particularly fond of the idea of the 'mainstream'. Another phrase which these commentators – and certain politicians – regularly invoke is 'the black armband view of history'. This representation of Australian history is a hot-button issue in the so-called 'culture wars', and is drawn from the following frame.

Australian history is one of triumph over adversity. The early settlers overcame many hardships, and any misdemeanours they committed should therefore be forgiven. The attempt by elites to promote a negative interpretation of history by drawing attention

to the mistreatment of Aborigines misrepresents what actually happened, and is based on a desire to build a national identity that does not reflect mainstream opinion. The elites seek to impose a revisionist version of everything on the rest of us, and in so doing promote their own interests but do not benefit today's Aborigines.

Through constant repetition, this frame has come to colour how many Australians think about the need for 'symbolic' as well as 'practical' reconciliation, in the form of an official government acknowledgement of and apology for past wrongs committed against Aboriginal people.

Because of the wide variation in how individual Australians think about these and other issues, and the way that political thinking and language evolve over time, it would be impossible to construct a definitive list of all the deep metaphors or frames that inform Australian politics. However, it is certainly possible to identify individual instances of dog whistling, and to make explicit the hidden messages that they contain. In the next section, we attempt to do just that.

3. Dog whistling in practice

You've got to be mindful of the consequences of the words.

President George W. Bush (2005)

As we have seen, dog whistling can take many forms – even silence, under the right conditions. However, in many cases a dog whistle is apparent in a sentence or a phrase. In this section, several such examples of dog whistling at work are presented. For the reader's benefit, both the *apparent meanings* and the *hidden meanings* are made explicit in each instance.

Of course, the messages that audiences hear are highly dependent on the circumstances in which a dog whistle is uttered. Section 4 discusses the context in which dog-whistle politics takes place, so as to illuminate the different ways in which it is possible for a politician to say one thing and mean another in modern, democratic Australia.

Prime Minister John Howard: 'Reconciliation in my mind is ... an acceptance first and foremost that we are all Australians together and that our national unity and identity as Australians is the starting point.'⁶

Apparent meaning: Indigenous people are just as Australian as non-Indigenous people.

Hidden meaning: Reconciliation depends on Aboriginal people embracing mainstream culture and lifestyles. It also depends on them abandoning their preoccupation with the history of dispossession and violence against their people.

Prime Minister John Howard: National security is ... about a proper response to terrorism. It's also about having a far-sighted, strong, well thought out defence policy. It is also about having an uncompromising view about the fundamental right of this country to protect its borders. It's about this nation saying to the world we are a generous, open-hearted people taking more refugees on a per capita basis than any nation except Canada, we have a proud record of welcoming people from 140 different nations. But we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.'⁷

Apparent meaning: Australia welcomes genuine refugees, but changing international circumstances mean that its government needs to be careful who it grants asylum.

Hidden meaning: People from Muslim background who seek asylum in Australia constitute a terrorist threat. Immigration and refugee policies therefore need to place security above humanitarian concerns.

⁶ Press conference, Parliament House, 14 October 1998, quoted in Bourke (2001), p. 202.

⁷ Quoted in Marr and Wilkinson (2003), p. 245

Prime Minister John Howard, responding to the controversy over Sheik Taj al-Din al-Hilali's comments about Australian women and 'uncovered meat': 'If they do not resolve this matter, it could do lasting damage to the perceptions of that community within the broader Australian community ... If it is not resolved, then unfortunately people will run around saying – well the reason they didn't get rid of him is because secretly some of them support his views.'⁸

Apparent meaning: The Muslim community in Australia should seek to agree on how to respond to Sheik Hilali's comments.

Hidden meaning: There are many Muslims in Australia that secretly support Sheik Hilali's views on women.

Prime Minister John Howard: 'Despite what we foolishly say about ourselves from time to time, and despite the fact that we needlessly from time to time apologise to the rest of the world for being less than 100 per cent when it comes to a lot of these things, we are a very tolerant, understanding, inclusive people. We don't give ourselves enough credit for just how tolerant we are.'⁹

Apparent meaning: Australians are generally open-minded and generous.

Hidden meaning: There's a lot that needs to be tolerated in Australia. With all that we have to put up with from ethnic communities, it's amazing that ordinary Australians haven't complained more.

Prime Minister John Howard: 'I don't find any racism in the Australian public. I find constant references to racism in articles and news commentary and in the utterances of my critics on the policy. I don't find, as I move around the community, people expressing racist sentiments about the illegal immigrants at all. It is not a racially based policy. We would apply the same approach irrespective of where the people were coming from.'¹⁰

Apparent meaning: Australians are not racist, and nor are the Coalition's immigration policies.

Hidden meaning: If others tell you your views on immigration are racist, that's because their definition of racism is wrong. In fact, it's okay to be suspicious of asylum seekers – the government agrees with you.

Prime Minister John Howard on the proposal that there should be no change to the custom of beginning the parliamentary day with Christian prayers: 'I don't say that disrespectfully of other religions but the – you know, the predominant religious culture of this country is Christianity. And, I mean, I always find it odd that you have to demonstrate your tolerance by denying your own heritage.'¹¹

Apparent meaning: Holding prayers at the start of the parliamentary day is a long-held custom drawn from Australia's Christian heritage.

Hidden meaning: Other religions are seeking to impose themselves on Australian society under the guise of political correctness. This is an affront to Christianity.

⁸ Quoted in Wakim (2006).

⁹ Howard 1997.

¹⁰ Howard 2001.

¹¹ Address to the nation's church leaders at the National Press Club, 9 August 2007 (Media Monitors 2007).

Leader of the National Party Tim Fisher: ‘At no stage did Aboriginal civilisation develop substantial buildings, roadways or even a wheeled car as part of their different priorities and approach ... Rightly or wrongly dispossession of Aboriginal civilisation was always going to happen. White settlement of the Australian land mass was inevitable.’¹²

Apparent meaning: Aboriginal people were extremely vulnerable to the superior technologies brought by early European settlers.

Hidden meaning: Aboriginal culture is backward and primitive, and therefore inferior to European culture.

Defence Minister Peter Reith: ‘You’ve got to be able to manage people coming into your country, you’ve got to be able to control that otherwise it can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities. Now that’s in no reference to anybody’s background, ethnic background, the Middle East or anything else. But you know that you couldn’t get a clearer message and that is if you can’t control who comes into your country then that is a security issue.’¹³

Apparent meaning: Regardless of their ethnicity, everyone who comes to Australia must be subject to strict border control procedures.

Hidden meaning: People who seek asylum in Australia, particularly people from the Middle East, are possibly terrorists. Those who criticise the Government’s immigration policies are therefore soft on terrorism.

Federal Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs Philip Ruddock on the number of people seeking asylum in Australia: ‘Maybe you can accommodate a few hundred, a thousand, twelve thousand, twenty thousand, one hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, a million. I mean, when does it become an issue about where you actually exercise some control to ensure you are able to manage the process?’¹⁴

Apparent meaning: Limits should be placed on the number of people to whom asylum is granted.

Hidden Meaning: There are huge numbers of people waiting for an opportunity to come to Australia and take advantage of our generosity. If the government takes a softer approach on asylum seekers, Australia will be inundated by foreigners, to the point where they may even outnumber white people.

¹² Quoted in Markus (2001), p. 76.

¹³ Reith (2001).

¹⁴ Quoted in Marr and Wilkinson (2003), p. 33.

Federal Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Kevin Andrews: ‘The issue of integration and the emphasis and requirement placed on migrants to demonstrate such willingness and capacity is nothing new. However, we cannot assume that the capacity of all of our potential migrants to integrate successfully is the same as their predecessors.’¹⁵

Apparent meaning: Some migrants integrate into Australian society better than others.

Hidden meaning: People from many different backgrounds have integrated well into Australian society. However, our recent experiences with Muslim immigrants show that we should be wary of Muslim people – they don’t integrate well.

President George W. Bush, five days after 9/11: ‘This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a long time.’¹⁶

Apparent meaning: Dealing with the perpetrators of terrorism is a large task.

Hidden meaning: Terrorism is an Islamic phenomenon. The fight against terrorism is therefore a holy war between Christians and Muslims.

¹⁵ Andrews (2007).

¹⁶ Quoted in BBC (2001).

4. Dog whistling in context

From the far east and the far west alike we behold menaces and contagion.

Alfred Deakin (1898)

4.1 Dog whistling and democracy

Writers have been calling attention to the dishonesty of politics for centuries. Niccolò Machiavelli, who considered tactical dishonesty to be essential to political success, wrote that ‘in order to maintain the state [a prince] is often obliged to act against his promise, against charity, against humanity, and against religion’ (Machiavelli 1976, p. 60). At the same time, the ideal leader should ‘seem merciful, faithful, human, trustworthy and religious’ to his subjects (Machiavelli 1976, p. 58). Machiavelli considered deceit to be a vital weapon in attaining and holding onto power, and therefore a legitimate political strategy. ‘The princes who have accomplished great deeds’, he observed, ‘are those who have cared little for keeping their promises and who have known how to manipulate the minds of men by shrewdness’ (Machiavelli 1976, p.58).

In modern democracies, politicians are meant to be held to account for their words and deeds. Nevertheless, public perceptions are often very negative. In Australia, for example, suspicion of politicians and their propensity for dishonesty is widespread. Only 23 per cent of respondents to a 2004 survey by the St James Ethics Centre agreed that ‘politicians are generally truthful in public life’, while 98 per cent believed that they ‘*should* be’. Moreover, 88 per cent of respondents indicated that ‘the general truthfulness – real or perceived – of politicians’ would affect their vote (Longstaff 2004). Despite the checks and balances of our modern political system – ministers who mislead parliament can be sacked, at least in theory – many Australians apparently believe that deceit in politics is still commonplace.

Dog whistling, however, is a very specific kind of deceit. Because a dog whistle is characterised by its deniability, a politician who dog whistles (and does so well) can’t be caught *in flagrante delicto* and forced to retract or resign. Instead, they simply emphasise the explicit or literal (and benign) rather than the implicit (and malevolent) meanings of their remarks. Consequently, politicians who deliberately dog whistle are not properly held to account for their statements. In a media-saturated society, where a party leader’s every statement is closely scrutinised, this can be a very useful tactic, but it also jeopardises the principles on which our democracy rests.

In fact, there is empirical evidence to support the assertion that appeals to racial prejudice are more persuasive for the target audience when they are coded or implicit rather than overt, because people like to think of themselves as egalitarian (Mendelberg 2001). The same point has been made about references to religious belief: ‘Like the inside joke that has to be explained,’ observes Bethany Albertson, ‘the explicit component will cheapen the more authentic connection formed via coded communication’ (Albertson 2006, p. 10). Moreover, the additional effort required to *interpret* an implicit message (as compared with an explicit statement intended for literal consumption) may make these messages more durable and less susceptible to

rational challenge. In other words, the subconscious processing needed to make sense of a dog whistle might in fact help the message remain front and centre long after the original utterance.

There is another way in which dog whistling undermines our democratic framework. By sending different (and possibly contradictory) messages to different parts of the electorate, voters end up with different conceptions of what a politician or a party stands for. If elected to office on the basis of those messages, their mandate to implement the policies that were put to the electorate is called into question. In fact, as Goodin and Saward (2005) argue, a party's policy mandate is undermined exactly to the extent that it has been disingenuous about its policies and the values that inform those policies. To put it another way: clarity of communication in politics is essential to the integrity of the democratic process. In sending different messages to different audiences, politicians who engage in dog whistling imperil democracy.

This is not to say that other kinds of political deceit and obfuscation are not themselves dangerous to the democratic process. Indeed, the ubiquity of 'spin' in today's political environment is arguably responsible for much of the disengagement that characterises party politics in Australia and other western countries. When political issues are 'managed' in much the same way that commercial brands and the public profiles of multinational corporations are publicly promoted, a dangerous gulf between the credibility and values of the general community and its political representatives is opened up.

Politicians of all political colours engage in spin, to varying degrees and with mixed success. Yet the weight of evidence indicates that dog whistling is more often than not a *conservative* phenomenon, and comparatively rare among politicians of progressive or liberal persuasion.¹⁷ This actually makes *a priori* sense: while the Left (broadly defined) has embraced the language and ideals of pluralism, non-discrimination, multiculturalism and social justice for minority groups, the Right (broadly defined) has tended to drag its feet on such issues. Appeals to prejudice and suspicion of outsiders – the stock-in-trade of the dog whistler – are therefore more likely to be successful among those who would consider voting conservative. This does not preclude left-of-centre politicians from engaging in spin, equivocation or even outright deceit; one could even speculate that spin is even more of a temptation for progressives struggling to articulate a meaningful challenge to the prevailing neo-liberal economic orthodoxy. Yet the practice of dog-whistle politics remains very much a conservative practice – as the remainder of this section will make clear.

4.2 Us and them

One explanation for the rise of dog-whistle politics in Australia – apart from the fact that some of its most skilful practitioners have been in government since 1996 – is the rift between standards of propriety in public language (such as that used by the media,

¹⁷ One prominent exception is the longevity of the E.S. 'Nigger' Brown Stand at a football stadium in Toowoomba. The stand was named after a white rugby league player in the 1960s, but Aboriginal activists have taken the issue to a United Nations committee on racial discrimination in an attempt to get the sign taken down. The management of the stadium in question still refuses to take it down, and has the support of Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, who argued that 'He was called that name in a different time and a different generation ... it would be inappropriate today, but it's not inappropriate bearing in mind the history of it' (ABC 2003).

politicians and organisations) and the attitudes held by many ‘ordinary’ Australians. As noted in Section 1, there are now laws proscribing racial vilification and discrimination on the basis of race, gender or sexuality. In addition to these legal protections, community leaders are generally expected to refrain from making prejudiced comments and to be sensitive to cultural differences in Australian society. In 2007, it is impossible to make the sorts of public comments about race, gender and sexuality that characterised the Bjelke-Petersen era in Queensland, for example.

However, these relatively new standards of public debate have outpaced voter sentiment, particularly on the issue of race. By way of illustration, the Coalition’s election victory in 1996 was at least partly due to voter unease about the progressive stance taken by the Keating Government on issues such as Aboriginal land rights, reconciliation and Australia’s relationship with its Asian neighbours (Manne 2004). In that election campaign, John Howard tapped into – and inflamed – resentment about ‘special treatment’ for ‘vested interests’. Subsequent research has shown that Australian voters are generally more conservative than politicians on issues with racial connotations (Jackman 1998; Wilson and Breusch 2004). With many voters receptive to views that are at odds with the standards commonly observed in public discourse, politicians are faced with a choice. Either they can lead public opinion on an emotionally charged issue such as race and risk a voter backlash, or they can take a populist approach and inflame prejudice in the community. Some want to have it both ways: to send a message of support to voters with racist leanings, but not to alienate those for whom an appeal to prejudice would be anathema. For these politicians, dog whistling is the tactic of choice.

As with Frank Luntz’s ‘playbook’ for Republican Party spin (quoted in Section 2), there is evidence that conservative politicians in Australia deliberately set out to divide the electorate on emotive issues like race and culture. One of the finest victories for wedge politics in recent decades was the Liberal Party’s 1996 campaign against Paul Keating and the ‘special interests’ he was said to represent (Williams 1997). Pamela Williams’s account of that election campaign includes the following description of the strategy behind the Liberals’ advertising campaign.

They would devise a campaign around the concept of ‘We’ and ‘Them’ ... with ‘we’ representing the whole community – or Howard’s much-vaunted politics of inclusion – and ‘them’ representing the many special groups associated with Keating ... As a theme, it expressed both the electorate’s alienation and an image of Labor as a divisive force. But it also allowed Howard to identify himself with the ‘we’ side – the broader community. (Williams 1997, p. 159)

In the hands of the Liberal Party’s spin-doctors,¹⁸ the exclusionary tactics inherent in opposing ‘them’ are characterised as a ‘politics of inclusion’ about ‘us’. Drawing on his peculiar notion of ‘egalitarianism’, Howard was able to generate resentment against the beneficiaries of Labor’s progressive social policies under the campaign

¹⁸ Including Lynton Crosby, who at the time of the 1996 federal election was Deputy Director of the Liberal Party of Australia and heavily involved in Howard’s campaign (Williams 1997), and who (as seen in Section 1) is credited with bringing dog-whistle politics to Britain during the 2005 general election.

slogan ‘For all of us’. But as Mungo MacCallum has said, ‘In Howard-Textor¹⁹ speak, “For all of us” meant “not the rest of you”, the rest being special-interest groups who had received particular attention under the previous government’ (MacCallum 2004, p. 70). The ‘Us and Them’ campaign of 1996, then, set out to divide the electorate under the banner of ‘unity’. The clearest articulation of Howard’s approach was in a 1995 speech on ‘The Role of Government: A Modern Liberal Approach.’

There is a frustrated mainstream in Australia today which sees government decisions increasingly driven by the noisy, self-interested clamour of powerful vested interests with scant regard for the national interest ... Many Australians in the mainstream feel powerless to compete with such groups, who seem to have the ear completely of the government on major issues (Howard 1995, p. 4).

Not long after the 1996 election, racial issues came to the fore with the debate over *Wik* and native title. Facing pressure from farmers and miners to limit the scope for native title claims, John Howard appeared on ABC Television brandishing a map produced by the National Farmers Federation which purported to show that ‘78 per cent of the land mass of Australia would be subject to a potential veto over mining and pastoral development by Aboriginal native title claimants as a consequence of *Wik*’ (Manne 2004, p. 19). As Senator Kerry O’Brien said in parliament: ‘It was a very simple message, delivered via a map coloured brown. He was saying to the community that if we are not careful the blacks will take over the place’ (Australia 1998b, p. 3189). For John Howard, ‘all of us’ deliberately excluded those Australians who had suffered most from dispossession and social disadvantage. Such messages were designed to foment anxiety about racial and cultural difference, but they were couched in the language of ‘unity’ and ‘inclusion’; that is, they fit our definition of dog whistling.

Interestingly, this kind of ‘politics of inclusion’ appears to have been imported from the United States, where right-wing think tanks and conservative cultural commentators have for decades been trying to shift public debate so as to represent economically libertarian and socially conservative viewpoints as the ‘politics of the people’ (Maddox 2005; Sawyer 2004). They have done so by claiming that progressive politicians have been held hostage to a small band of ‘elites’ who don’t reflect mainstream opinion, and who represent a narrow range of sectional interests at the expense of ordinary people. This is one of the great triumphs of ‘re-framing’ for the conservative side of politics, which has been able to channel voter resentment stemming from economic and social alienation into hostility towards ‘special interests’ and those who are seen to represent them (Lakoff 2004; Nunberg 2007).

¹⁹ Mark Textor is Lynton Crosby’s business partner in the firm Crosby|Textor. He was principal pollster and consultant to John Howard’s election campaigns in 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004, and is described on Crosby|Textor’s website (www.crosbytextor.com) as ‘the most astute judge of public sentiment in Australia today’ and ‘a pioneer of values-based communication’. He is also said to be an early practitioner of ‘push-polling’ in Australia. Push-polling is a political tactic imported from the United States, wherein voters are told ‘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, and towards your candidate’ (Clancy 2007). Textor is said to have been behind attempts to use push-polling in the 1994 Northern Territory election campaign (Clancy 2007).

This line of thinking has been satirised in the Australian context by Dennis Glover (2003, p. 61).

Since the 1960s and 1970s, society has been captured by a ‘shrill-voiced’, ‘baby boomer’, ‘new class elite’, ‘conga line of hissing and spitting’ teachers, academics, lawyers, feminists, social workers, and, especially, ‘stridently left-wing’ ABC and Fairfax press journalists of ‘dubious intellectual credentials’, who are driven by the fear of their impending retirement and who are to blame for everything from ‘the breakdown of the nuclear family’ to the Bali bombing.

Tapping into this mindset (which they have also sought to create), conservative politicians are thereby able to present themselves as representing ordinary, hardworking people against a barrage of sectional interests and their claims for government assistance. In so doing, they foster a sense of *persecution* in the community – the sense that the values and livelihoods of ‘ordinary, decent people’ are increasingly under threat, and that this situation is due to the unwarranted power of special interests. They have also drawn attention away from the real ‘elites’ – that is, the business leaders and wealthy individuals who are the traditional constituency of conservative politics. Instead of the *economic* dimensions of globalisation and trade liberalisation, it is the *social* dimensions – such as increased immigration, racial tensions and a perceived threat to a certain notion of Australian culture – that are held to be responsible for changes in the cultural fabric.

These themes, which have been promoted by right-wing intellectuals and think-tanks since at least the 1980s (Maddox 2005; Sawer 2004; Markus 2001), were picked up by conservative politicians from the early 1990s (Markus 2001). With constant repetition, terms like *elite*, *special interests* and *black armband view of history* gained a resonance beyond their surface meaning, calling to mind divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that did not need to be explicitly enunciated to be understood. By this stage, such terms – and the concepts they activated – had entered the realm of dog-whistle politics.

4.3 Border protection, national security and the politics of race

Practitioners of dog-whistle politics often attempt to legitimise feelings of persecution among their target audience. Ironically enough, one of its most effective targets turned out to be those fleeing *real* persecution in other countries: refugees seeking asylum in Australia. Much has been written and said about the federal Coalition Government’s treatment of asylum seekers and its manipulation of public opinion regarding immigration policy.²⁰ It is not the purpose of this paper to consider the merits of the ‘Pacific solution’ or even the extent to which government statements reflected the truth of the situation. It is, however, worth examining how politicians were able to generate fear regarding asylum seekers – and then appeal to that same fear – while at the same time denying that there were doing so.

There is little doubt that suspicion of asylum seekers has been (and remains) common among the Australian population, and that the emotional weight of these feelings has

²⁰ See, for example, David Marr and Marian Wilkinson’s *Dark Victory* (2003) and Mungo MacCallum’s *Girt by Sea: Australia, the Refugees and the Politics of Fear* (2002)

electoral implications. Social researcher Hugh Mackay documented this in one of his regular reports on the ‘mood of the nation’ in July 2001 (just before the *Tampa* episode).

There is a widespread view that people who have arrived illegally ... are likely to *behave* illegally once here ... some of the most ugly and vicious outpourings of hatred had occurred in discussion of boat people/illegal immigrants ... so strong are the passions aroused by fear of illegal immigrants and of Australia being ‘swamped by Asians’ that such matters have the potential to overwhelm factors like the GST in the coming federal election (Quoted in Manne 2004, p. 35).

As already noted, conservative politicians were themselves at least partly responsible for creating the fears and suspicions that fed these kinds of attitudes (although doubtless a ‘hardcore’ constituency would react positively to racial appeals in any event (Markus 2001)). These views were aggravated in turn by the way that some major media outlets covered the *Tampa* and ‘children overboard’ stories, as shown in Section 5. The naked racism displayed in letters to the editor and by callers to talkback radio shows during this period attests to the strength of feeling among many voters.

Yet xenophobia can be tempered through greater awareness of the common humanity shared with members of the outside group. Research in the United Kingdom has found that providing contextual information about asylum seekers and their circumstances can often mitigate prejudiced attitudes towards people of other nationalities and cultures (Newman 2007). Bearing this in mind, the Coalition Government’s attempt to suppress any ‘humanising’ stories about asylum seekers held offshore is particularly unsettling. That government policy was to prevent images casting refugees in a positive light became apparent in this notorious exchange, between an official from the Defence Department and Senator John Faulkner, that took place during the Senate inquiry into ‘A Certain Maritime Incident’ (i.e. the ‘children overboard’ affair):

Brian Humphreys: Immigration had concerns about identifying potential asylum seekers and so we got some guidance on ensuring that there were no personalising or humanising images.

Senator Faulkner: You’re kidding me?

Brian Humphreys: No.

(ABC 2002b)

In fact, the very language that key members of the government used in the lead-up to the 2001 election avoided any acknowledgement of the desperation that brings people to seek asylum (and therefore of the need for compassion). The Immigration Minister at the time, Philip Ruddock, became notorious for using dry, legalistic turns of phrase that obscured the real issues at stake (Glover 2003). In an interview on the ABC’s *7.30 Report*, for example, Ruddock referred to a six-year-old Iranian boy – who was suffering chronic trauma associated with being held in detention for more than a year – as ‘it’ on four separate occasions (MacCallum 2002, p. 6). A letter writer to *The Age* criticised Ruddock’s use of the term ‘unlawful non-citizens’ and ‘illegals’ to describe asylum seekers housed in detention centres.

This is language designed to discourage compassion, to exorcise empathy from the Australian public, to replace ‘the fair go’ with fear and loathing. Language that seeks to demean us. To harden our hearts. The language is reminding us that those we once knew as ‘boatpeople’ and ‘refugees’ fleeing a totalitarian regime are simply criminals (quoted in Glover 2003, p. 52).

With asylum seekers thus portrayed as a threat to the nation (with criminal tendencies), members of the government were able to frame immigration policy as a matter of ‘border protection’ and ‘national security’, bypassing the pressing humanitarian issues at stake. Their stance was subsequently legitimised in the minds of many Australians when the World Trade Centre was attacked by terrorists on September 11, barely three weeks after the *Tampa* arrived in Australian waters. To emphasise the need for a refugee policy with a strong ‘national security’ dimension, the Prime Minister made ‘a direct link between Australian border protection laws and the 9/11 attacks’ only a few days prior to the November 2001 election (Atkins 2001). In a very carefully phrased interview with the *Courier Mail*’s Dennis Atkins, he said that ‘Australia had no way to be certain terrorists, or people with terrorist links, were not among asylum seekers trying to enter the country by boat from Indonesia’ (Atkins 2001).²¹ Earlier in the campaign, Defence Minister Peter Reith had stated that the strong line on border protection went ‘hand in hand’ with the fight against terrorism’ (quoted in NSW Anti-Discrimination Board 2003, p. 51). In both these examples, the link between asylum seekers and terrorism is strongly suggested, but in ways that allow Howard and Reith to deny they were accusing asylum seekers – many of whom were fleeing violence in their home countries – of being terrorists.

In fact, there was no evidence that the *Tampa* refugees, or any other asylum seekers, were terrorists or had terrorist links. It was subsequently revealed that ASIO had ‘assessed thousands of ‘unauthorised arrivals’ ... but found no concerns about any of them’. According to an article in the *Sun Herald* more than a year after the 2001 election, these facts ‘undermine claims about terrorist groups trying to smuggle members into Australia by boat’ (quoted in NSW Anti-Discrimination Board 2003, p. 51). But Howard and Reith’s almost-but-not-quite assertion of a connection between asylum seekers and the terrorist threat had served its purpose. As one Labor Party strategist put it later, the ‘boatpeople’ issue ‘took the arse out of our vote, causing the ALP to fall fast and hard’ (quoted in Ward 2002, p. 31).

In fact, the politics of ‘us and them’ often thrives on representations of a common enemy or outsider, against which ‘mainstream’ or ‘ordinary’ people are contrasted. The demonisation of outsiders is a common thread in Australian history, as Anthony Burke’s *In Fear of Security: Australia’s Invasion Anxiety* (2001) has shown. It is also very useful for politicians who seek to exploit community fears for their own purposes.

[The] construction of a racialised other is a key means of giving a sense to many Australians of belonging, as being normal while other groups are different. The ‘we’ found in the mainstream media is pervasive, the law-abiding, hard-working, ‘fair-go’ Australians as opposed to ‘them’, the others

²¹ When Atkins showed Howard the front page story the night before its publication, Howard is reported to have exclaimed: ‘Good. Excellent!’ (Allard 2001).

with ‘un-Australian’ values and beliefs (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board 2003, p. 42)

With this in mind, the hidden meaning of the Liberal Party’s campaign slogan for the 2001 election – ‘We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’ – becomes clearer, and altogether more sinister.

National security was again milked for political dividends in early 2003, when each Australian household received a booklet purporting to inform members of the public about how they could contribute to the fight against terrorism. Entitled *Let’s Look Out for Australia: Protecting Our Way of Life from a Possible Terrorist Threat*, it was accompanied by a letter from Prime Minister Howard and (as noted in Section 2) a magnet that allowed Australians to be reminded of the terrorist threat each time they opened their fridge. But rather than placating anxieties about terrorism, this ‘information campaign’ may have served to heighten them. With the Australian Government calling on householders to be on the alert for people who look like terrorists, some Australians may have heard an additional message, one that vindicated their preconceived notions of people from certain parts of the world. As Matthew Ryan (2003) puts it:

Aside from serving as a prop for the delusions of the mentally ill, the call for Australians to act as individual surveillance units is surely an attempt to activate fearfulness, fuel suspicion and to set the populace into a state of alarm that will be placated only with war elsewhere and ever increased controls at home.

These sage predictions have indeed come to pass. Barely a month after *Let’s Look Out for Australia* arrived in Australia’s letterboxes, the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ (including Australian forces) invaded Iraq. Since that time, legislation mandating the use of indefinite detention on a ‘reasonable’ basis for people suspected of involvement in terrorism has been passed by the federal parliament.²² Government statements about the terrorist threat – including *Let’s Look Out for Australia* – arguably functioned as a dog whistle to those people who might otherwise have objected to Australian participation in the Iraq War and the dismantling of civil liberties at home. Indeed, one of the notable features of the politics surrounding ‘national security’ is that members of the government and officials are able to withhold much relevant information from public scrutiny for nebulous reasons of ‘security’. Anthony Burke (2001, p. xxix) observes that representing issues as security-sensitive ‘effectively quarantines them from debate – they are simply necessary, inarguable.’

As fears about terrorism were reinforced by politicians and in the media (as described in Section 5), suspicions of people of Middle Eastern appearance and Muslim faith have grown, to the extent that *Islamic faith* and *Islamist violence* are commonly conflated in the popular media and in the minds of the community (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board 2003). Interestingly, the Prime Minister has made a point of

²² The controversy surrounding the case of Dr Mohammed Haneef, an Indian doctor working at a hospital on the Gold Coast and second cousin of two of the men implicated in the foiled attack at Glasgow Airport on in June 2007, centred on how these various laws were designed to operate (Wright and Marriner 2007).

emphasising the law-abiding and non-extremist character of Australian Muslims, for example in the context of an arson attack on a Brisbane mosque in 2001. Yet his comments at that time came with a significant caveat. ‘If their loyalty is to Australia as is ours, and their commitment is to this country,’ he said, ‘we must not allow our natural anger at the extremes of Islam which have been manifested in the attack on the World Trade Centre to spill over onto Islamic people generally’ (quoted in Shine 2001). When parsed carefully, what this comment appears to imply is that it *is* natural to resort to violence against Muslims if their loyalty is *not* to Australia. In other words, if ‘they’ don’t try hard enough to be like ‘us’, then they should expect retribution.

This quote is indicative of another characteristic of dog-whistling. Joseph Wakim, founder of the Australian Arabic Council and a former multicultural affairs commissioner, has observed that ‘the Prime Minister consistently refers to Muslims in the third person – as they and them rather than you – reinforcing the view that he is dog-whistling to non-Muslims, rather than talking to Muslims as fellow Australians’ (Wakim 2006). In the context of John Howard’s peculiar ‘politics of inclusion’, this tendency – to use the third person when talking of particular groups in society, especially those groups often associated with ‘special interests’ – unmasks the real intent behind appeals to ‘mainstream Australia’ and ‘national unity’.

As well as exploiting notions of national and cultural unity, politicians who seek to ‘play the race card’ also resort to the language of tolerance and equality, lest their true agenda be exposed. Over recent years, the language of equal rights and equal opportunity has been used to argue for the extinguishment of Aboriginal native title (Markus 2001), for draconian welfare policies (Markus 2001), and against affirmative action in the United States (Nunberg 2007). Ben Pitcher (2006, p. 537) has observed that:

The problem ... with winning the language war on the question of race is that now it becomes far harder than before to challenge racist discourses that are, accordingly, obliged to find expression *through the language of multiculturalism and anti-racism*.²³

So when leaders make a point of celebrating diversity and cultural freedoms and denouncing prejudice, we would do well to consider what their comments imply. For example, in the 2005 UK general election – the same campaign which saw Michael Howard ask the electorate ‘Are you thinking what we’re thinking?’ – Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to distance himself from the Tories’ controversial and inflammatory statements about immigration.

Concern over asylum and immigration is not about racism. It is about fairness. People want to know that the rules and systems we have in place are fair; fair to hard-working taxpayers, fair to those who genuinely need asylum and who use the correct channels; fair to those legitimate migrants who make a major contribution to our economy (quoted in Pitcher 2006, p. 543).

²³ Emphasis in original.

As Pitcher (2006, p. 543) points out, each of these descriptions of asylum-seekers invokes the spectre of foreigners trying to take advantage of the system: ‘those who genuinely need asylum’ stands in opposition to the ‘bogus asylum-seeker’; ‘legitimate migrants’ calls to mind their illegitimate counterparts; ‘those who use the correct channels’ are clearly more entitled than those who do not. In fact, Blair’s comments are arguably pitched at a white, middle-class audience: those that might support multiculturalism as an idea, but privately hold reservations about the number of foreigners in Britain. In this example, Blair upholds what Tali Mendelberg (2001) has called the ‘norm of equality’: the expectation that mainstream politics, having entered a more enlightened age, will not partake of blatant appeals to race.

The lesson here is that when political leaders refer to Australians’ sense of ‘egalitarianism’ and the ‘fair go’, they are not necessarily asking everyone to rise above their prejudice to embrace true diversity; instead, they may be cleverly invoking the prospect that others may not share these admirable principles. So it is that John Howard told the nation that ‘I don’t have a prejudiced bone in my body’ (quoted in Markus 2001, p. 91), and even that ‘the contribution that Australians of Asian descent have made to this country has been immense’ (quoted in Markus 2001, p. 102), yet he was still able to question the considerable progress in race relations with the following comment.

The objection I have to multiculturalism is that multiculturalism is in effect saying that it is impossible to have an Australian ethos, that it is impossible to have a common Australian culture. So we have to pretend that we are a federation of cultures and that we’ve got a bit from every part of the world. I think that is hopeless (quoted in Markus 2001, p. 87).

Such comments represent a shift away from genuine pluralism (as embodied in the official policy of multiculturalism) towards the affirmation of a single notion of what it means to be Australian – one defined by the Prime Minister and his political allies and bound up in notions of the ‘mainstream’. If immigrants wish to be truly Australian, by this logic, they must comport themselves in certain ways and pay homage to certain ideals – in short, they must ‘integrate’. Little of this is said explicitly – instead, it seethes under the surface of explicit articulation and even under the surface of consciousness, waiting for those with a tuned ear to hear the veiled message.

5. Dog whistling and the media

In politics, the emotion of fear often grows at the expense of all others. One is willing to be afraid of everything, when one no longer has a strong desire for anything at all.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856)

Modern democratic politics would be very different without the media. This distinctive symbiotic relationship has come to define the way that political messages are crafted and disseminated. A study of dog-whistle politics therefore needs to consider how political messages are filtered and interpreted through the media.

5.1 The news cycle

In general, the way that large media organisations operate would seem to encourage, or at least acquiesce in, dog-whistle politics. The scramble of the daily news cycle, the pace with which journalists must decide whether and how to run a story, creates conditions under which apparently benign statements can easily slip past critical attention. Moreover, time pressures in a competitive media marketplace can mean that journalists repeat the phraseology used by politicians in their public statements without questioning the assumptions behind those terms. If a phrase has been carefully crafted with the aim of dog whistling to a select audience, simply replicating it in a news report amplifies the message's effect. Television viewers (or radio listeners) who are the target of a dog whistle can still hear the implicit message. Alternatively, smaller or niche organisations more attuned to certain kinds of messages – for example, the Christian media – may notice that message and communicate it, in more or less explicit ways, to their respective audiences.

By the same token, the more willing journalists and editors are to question whether a word or phrase is an appropriate way of characterising an issue, the less chance there is that a dog whistle will go 'under the radar'. This is why it is essential that media practitioners understand the circumstances under which politicians tend to make use of dog-whistle politics.

5.2 Media representation of race and religion

Increasingly, political issues are played out in a globalised context. Constant news coverage of international events disseminates images and sounds across the world at an astonishing pace. The immediacy of television news means that audiences feel closer than ever to events occurring on the other side of the world. Perhaps inevitably, then, domestic issues are increasingly interpreted with reference to their international dimensions.

The reality of the mass media, and human nature, is that more interest is paid to events and parts of the world where conflict occurs. The impressions that we develop of people from other countries are therefore coloured by the media coverage that has emanated from those countries – particularly where such coverage is dominated by reports of violence and unrest. This in turn influences how receptive individuals are to

political messages about foreign policy, immigration, national security, and other such issues.

Although we have so far emphasised the role of politicians in manipulating latent community prejudice, it is also worth noting the important part that the media can play in reinforcing, or failing to discourage, such prejudice. According to a study of racism in media discourse by the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, there remains a pattern of ‘institutional racism’ in the media’s representation of issues with racial overtones, with ethnic minority groups often portrayed negatively or as an external threat.

The majority of journalists, editors and media commentators do not perceive that their professional practices or values may be influenced by racist assumptions. Racism is still viewed as overt acts or statements of extreme views of racial superiority. However, institutional racism within the media industry, racism embedded in its policies, practices and professional culture, can manifest in less overt but equally damaging ways (NSW Anti-Discrimination Board 2003, p. 46).

This is not to say that the media are wholly responsible for the way in which politicians take advantage of latent community prejudice. However, we must acknowledge that the media can reinforce – and sometimes even create – the perceptions that feed intolerance and outright bigotry.

Perhaps the most pressing example of this is the way that debates about immigration, asylum seekers and the place of other cultures in Australian society have played out against the background of the ‘War on Terror’. As shown in Section 4, notions of ‘national security’ have been used to arouse suspicion of asylum seekers and, more generally, people of Muslim faith. This came to a head in the lead-up to the 2001 federal election, which was dominated by the twin issues of terrorism and refugee policy – brought together under the banner of ‘border protection’.

A study of articles appearing in *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* in the 12 months before and after September 11, 2001, found that 37 per cent of the 635 articles mentioning the words ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’ or ‘boat people’ in those newspapers during the period also included the words ‘terror’ or ‘terrorist(s)’ (Manning 2004, p. 12). Looking at the coverage of international news, it is easy to see how readers were prompted into making connections between the violence in other parts of the world and the disposition of people arriving in Australia from areas of conflict. Of the 1,443 articles mentioning ‘Arab’, ‘Palestinian’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islam’, 58 per cent also used one or more of the following words: ‘violent’, ‘death’, ‘attack’, ‘kill’, ‘bomb’, ‘gun’, ‘terror’, ‘suicide’, or ‘gunmen’ (Manning 2004, p. 20). Peter Manning (2004, p.45) describes the way these newspapers (and particularly the *Telegraph*) portrayed issues like the *Tampa*, the ‘children overboard’ affair and gang rapes in Western Sydney over this period.

Arabs and Muslims ... are seen as violent to the point of terrorism ... Arab young men, in particular, are seen as especially threatening, wanting ‘our’ Caucasian women and not policed sufficiently by their own communities ... The men, women and children seeking to come here ‘illegally’ from the

Muslim Middle East are portrayed as tricky, ungrateful, undeserving (possibly well-off), often disgusting and barely human.

Newspaper reports during this time commonly made use of a ‘flood’ metaphor in describing the arrival of refugees in Australia, talking of ‘waves’ and ‘tides’ of ‘queue-jumpers’ (Manning 2004, p. 36). The implicit message was that Australia was in danger of being overrun (or *inundated*) by foreigners, and readers (especially readers of the *Telegraph*) responded with vitriol in letters to the editor. They referred to the *Tampa* refugees as ‘Muslim invaders’, ‘criminals and parasites’, ‘scum’ and ‘demonic’ (Manning 2004, p. 37). One letter writer referred to the those on the *Tampa* as ‘the gimme brigade who want everything now’ (quoted in Kampmark 2006, p. 17), while another was more honest about the emotions that the asylum seeker issue aroused: ‘Middle East people, through images we see and their countless wars with each other, scare the daylights out of us’ (quoted in Kampmark 2006, p.11). With public suspicion of Muslims and Arabs stoked by the media, the situation was ripe for cynical politicians to exploit, both through dog-whistle politics and through more blatant appeals to racial and cultural prejudice.

5.3 Right-wing commentators

Over and above what the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board describes as ‘institutional racism’ in the media, there are a number of media commentators who consistently reinforce racial, religious and cultural intolerance. As more active participants in the process than their usually well-meaning journalistic counterparts, these individuals are more directly implicated in the phenomenon of dog-whistle politics in Australia.

A favourite strategy that these commentators employ is to put a reactionary or inflammatory ‘spin’ on ostensibly bland statements or policies on the part of the government or ministers. When politicians profess reluctance to endorse their pronouncements, they claim that this is a result of a growing mindset of ‘political correctness’ preventing the truly free expression of opinions in public life. This in turn allows politicians to bemoan the way in which political correctness and its proponents, the ‘thought police’, have stifled genuine political debate.

Many, but not all, of these commentators are connected in some way with right-wing think-tanks such as the Institute for Public Affairs, the Centre for Independent Studies, the Sydney Institute and the Menzies Research Centre; some also have entrenched links to the Liberal Party. Yet they often represent themselves as a ‘voice in the wilderness’, willing to challenge the prevailing politically correct orthodoxy that has gained a stranglehold over public debate. ‘In fact’, argues Dennis Glover, they ‘are not true “contrarians” at all. Their aim isn’t unpopularity but populism. Their target isn’t the fearless lone-wolf citizen, but the G-spot of anger and resentment that lies in everyone’s subconscious’ (Glover 2003, p. 77). These commentators’ support for Liberal party policies and personalities, along with their ability to inflame subconscious resentments among their listeners and readers, mean that conservative politicians are able to associate themselves in the minds of some voters with ideas or messages that they are impelled to repudiate publicly. Indeed, individual commentators like Andrew Bolt and Piers Ackerman have been said to work in concert with the Prime Minister’s office to disseminate the right messages in ‘ideological lockstep’ (West 2006).

Some commentators are openly partisan, including John Howard's favourite talkback radio host, Alan Jones. Jones, a former Liberal candidate and speechwriter, was found guilty in early 2007 of breaching the media code of practice by broadcasting material 'that was likely to encourage violence or brutality' and 'likely to vilify people of Lebanese and of Middle-Eastern background on the basis of ethnicity' (ACMA 2007). During the infamous Cronulla riots in December 2005, Jones had urged 'biker gangs to be present at Cronulla railway station when these Lebanese thugs arrive'. He also declared that 'Australians old and new should not have to put up with this scum' and that 'we don't have Anglo-Saxon kids out there raping women in western Sydney' (Bodey 2007).

Jones's comments were an undisguised appeal to his listeners' racist leanings, and therefore not a dog whistle *per se*. On the other hand, the Prime Minister's response to the Australian Communications and Broadcasting Authority's findings against Jones was an example of dog-whistle politics at its most adept. 'I think Alan Jones is an outstanding broadcaster,' he said. 'I don't think he's a person who encourages prejudice in the Australian community, not for one moment, but he is a person who articulates what a lot of people think' (AAP 2007). While Howard denied that he supported Jones's comments, he made a point of remarking on the concordance between Jones and the thinking of 'ordinary' Australians. This episode shows how certain individuals in the media sometimes even create the conditions in which a dog whistle is possible. In the absence of Jones's original comments, in other words, Howard would not have been able to link himself with their sentiments, even as he denied doing so.²⁴

This style of dog whistling, in which a politician associates himself with reactionary views but never explicitly endorses them, is a feature of John Howard's relationship with the media. During the *Tampa* crisis in 2001, as Howard almost-but-not-quite accused some asylum seekers of being terrorists-in-waiting (see Section 4), the following diatribe was broadcast by Alan Jones.

How many of these Afghan boat people are sleepers? Only the most stringent background checks should be a condition of them even being considered as refugees. That is the highest test possible. They should have to pass (quoted in ABC 2001).

Other right-wing commentators also came to Howard's defence, interpreting his reluctance to assert a direct link between the 'illegals' and terrorism as a sign of over-the-top political correctness. Just three days before the 2001 election, Tim Blair wrote in *The Australian*:

It seems that Howard and Reith were entirely correct to touch, however lightly, on the issue of possible links between terrorists and refugees. Neither did so in a manner calculated to enrage. Neither directed any accusations at the

²⁴ It could be argued that Jones's influence made it difficult for any politician to criticise him; Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd conspicuously refused to do so. Nevertheless, Howard's comments can also be interpreted as a deliberate dog whistle to those members of Jones's audience who agreed with the strident tenor of Jones comments about the Cronulla riots.

Tampa refugees. They merely offered some sensible, precautionary notions, about which nobody should be alarmed (Blair 2001).

Sometimes the proximity between politicians and such polemicists is such that it becomes clear that they are ‘courting the same constituency’ (Markus 2001, p. 104). For example, three nights before the Queensland state election in 1998 – the zenith of One Nation’s electoral success – John Howard tried to staunch the Coalition’s losses by appearing on the Stan Zemanek radio show (‘renowned for its pro-Hanson stance’) to emphasise his government’s policies on native title and immigration, two issues sure to resonate with listeners thinking about voting for One Nation (Markus 2001, p. 104-5). Howard’s attempt to shore up support among Zemanek’s listeners shows the extent to which particular individuals within the media can become a vehicle for politicians seeking to disseminate different messages to different parts of the electorate.

5.4 Narrowcasting

Given the variety of media sources available to Australians today, we can all choose to engage only with media ‘content’ that reflects our own personal political outlook. For example, people who regularly listen to Alan Jones may be more likely to take note of the opinions of right-wing commentators in tabloids like *The Daily Telegraph* and less likely to watch or listen to one of the publicly-funded broadcasters; they are also likely to hold more conservative political views (Hamilton 2006).

As more and more choice over media ‘content’ is made available, particularly in an online format, this phenomenon is likely to become more entrenched. In one sense it is perfectly natural, in that we automatically gravitate towards those media outlets with which we are most comfortable. In another sense, however, limiting the kinds of news and commentary that we are exposed to has the potential to restrict our understanding of the world and the possible ways in which we think about certain issues.

There is a name for the shift towards more specific and targeted media content aimed at a select audience: *narrowcasting*. The term need not apply to news and current affairs, or to media content with a political dimension; narrowcasting can be aimed at audiences interested in any specific subject, genre or style. In the United States, where a large population means that ever more ‘narrow’ content can attract large audiences, this phenomenon is fodder for successful marketing techniques – for example using the hundreds of channels available via cable television (Ranney 1990). For our purposes, narrowcasting has obvious implications for the way that politicians communicate with their constituencies. It means that politicians can target messages to particular audiences, the individual members of which will tend to engage with only a limited range of other media sources.

It has been argued that dog whistling is a more sophisticated throwback to the Janus-faced politics of a less media-saturated era.

In a way, dog-whistle politics merely resurrects a practice common in the days of ‘whistle-stop campaigns’ and segmented news markets, when candidates could say different things to different audiences in complete confidence that

no one would ever notice the discrepancies. Clever marketing techniques do for today's politicians what moving trains and localised newspapers did for those of a previous generation (Goodin and Saward 2005, p. 471).

Obviously, politicians wish to communicate with the broader community, not just the listeners of a particular radio broadcaster or the readers of a certain newspaper, and will use a wide range of media outlets to do so. However, we might expect them to communicate in different ways according to the type of media environment – and the kind of audience – in question. A well-known Australian example is the 'froth and bubble' that characterised the regular appearances of political opponents Kevin Rudd and Joe Hockey on Channel 7's *Sunrise* program (ABC 2007).

Narrowcasting provides a useful way of thinking about dog-whistle politics. Certain audiences – those who read particular newspapers, watch particular television shows, listen to particular radio broadcasters and even visit particular websites – will be more receptive than others to political messages involving an appeal to racial or other prejudices. Indeed, intolerance is the stock-in-trade for certain prominent media personalities, as we have seen. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that Prime Minister Howard's favoured medium is radio, and commercial talkback radio in particular. He is particularly fond of a select group of broadcasters, including Sydney's Alan Jones and John Laws and Melbourne's Neil Mitchell (Young 2007; Ester 2007). However, while narrowcasting provides access to an audience with a leaning towards certain political views, it doesn't mean that the media outlets in question are hermetically sealed from the attention of the wider world. Politicians are very much aware that they are constantly being monitored by many sources, and that they need to distance themselves from any accusations of outright prejudice. In these circumstances, a dog whistle is an ideal way to maximise the impact of an exclusionary message while still maintaining a façade of tolerance.

6. Conclusions

The wages of fear are political success.

Senator John Faulkner (2003)

Dog-whistle politics continues to be a potent political tactic in Australia, particularly for politicians who set out to inflame community divisions while not violating contemporary standards of debate. It taps into feelings of persecution which conservative politicians, and their supporters in the media, have helped to create and sustain. Having embraced the language of tolerance and pluralism, left-of-centre politicians are rarely implicated in dog-whistle politics, although they are often guilty of using language to distort truth in other ways, notably through their constant reliance on 'spin'.

Dog whistling is a problem because it undermines democracy. Clarity and directness are especially important in political communication, because voters are asked to decide which individual or party is best placed to represent their interests. Dog whistling works against clarity and directness; it allows politicians to send multiple and ambiguous messages to voters while denying that they are doing so. Over recent years, dog whistlers have been especially well-placed to exploit community concerns arising from overseas conflict and the threat of terrorism. They have also sought to create and inflame paranoia about minority groups and outsiders, and to taint the politics of immigration and Aboriginal affairs with parochialism and suspicion.

So how can we resist this insidious form of political communication? First, by recognising how it is able to succeed in the first place. At its most adept, dog whistling works because it makes use of deep-seated but often unspoken ideas about Australia, its people and its place in the world. Dog whistlers draw upon these ideas – usually only subtly or implicitly – in order to communicate meaningfully with voters who hold certain views about immigration, multiculturalism, welfare and Australian culture. Yet ideas about nationhood and identity are best discussed openly, lest they become open to distortion and manipulation.

Second, dog-whistling can be subject to critical appraisal by journalists and media commentators. It is the media's role to ensure that debates about national identity and culture take place in civilised fashion, and that the comments of politicians are properly scrutinised.

Third, as citizens we can all question what politicians tell us, even where their messages are apparently benign. In recent years, many concealed messages have slipped 'under the radar' without being subject to question. Will the next election be characterised once again by dog-whistle politics, or will Australians awaken to how some politicians say one thing but really mean another?

Appendix A – A dog whistler’s dictionary

We have seen that dog whistling makes use of words and phrases that implicitly refer to other, hidden ideas. Although dog whistling can take many forms – even silence, in the right circumstances – there are also many stock phrases commonly used in dog-whistle politics. This dog-whistler’s ‘dictionary’ seeks to make explicit what these terms really mean. It is not a definitive list of such terms, which would be impossible in any case because political spin-doctors are endlessly creative in devising ways to say one thing and mean another. It does however include many of the words and phrases regularly used by skilful practitioners of dog-whistle politics.

Of course, the meaning of any phrase ultimately depends on the context in which it is used, and the terms in this dictionary will not always activate a hidden meaning; that is, they are not dog whistles every time they are uttered. Nevertheless, in the right hands these seemingly innocuous phrases take on altogether more sinister connotations.

For ease of comprehension, examples of the usage of each phrase are provided. These constructions are not drawn from real comments by politicians in each case.

Dog whistle	Translation
We/us	White Australians; people who have assimilated into mainstream Australia; ordinary Australians; not the elites. <i>We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.</i>
They/them	Aborigines; Asians; Muslims; ethnic thugs; other people who don’t speak English properly; the elites. <i>They need to learn to respect women and the Australian way of life.</i>
Ordinary/decent/sensible people/folk/Australians	People with real jobs; people who vote for one of the major political parties; not the elites; not teenagers; not unemployed. <i>I think ordinary, decent people would support these laws.</i>
Mainstream	Of European heritage; English-speaking; not interested in or represented by the ABC or SBS. <i>Mainstream Australians have better things to think about, like meeting their mortgage repayments and getting the kids to school.</i>
Australian way of life	Having a real job; loving sport; drinking socially; eating meat; mainstream. <i>People who come to Australia should conform to the Australian way of life.</i>

Dog whistle	Translation
Common sense	<p>The views held by ordinary, decent people, not the elites.</p> <p><i>Common sense says that marriage should be between a man and a woman.</i></p>
Judeo-Christian values/tradition/ethic/heritage	<p>European in origin; not overtly religious but believing that certain religious values are beneficial for social cohesion.</p> <p><i>One of the defining features of Australian culture is our Judeo-Christian heritage, even though some people try to deny that.</i></p>
Australian values	<p>Values held by ordinary people, but not by the vested interests.</p> <p><i>People who come to Australia should respect Australian values.</i></p>
Mateship	<p>Looking after your friend in battle; sticking up for your friend no matter what, especially against ‘them’; social drinking and antics among males.</p> <p><i>Through the horrors of war, one of the few positives to emerge was how the Aussie soldiers looked after their mates.</i></p>
A fair go	<p>Given a chance to succeed; free of bureaucratic impediment; free from interference from vested interests; free to make money without burdensome taxation.</p> <p><i>Reforming the taxation system gives small business a fair go.</i></p>
Vested interests/special interests	<p>Aborigines; Muslims; university students; academics; artists; environmentalists; homosexuals; not big business.</p> <p><i>Over recent years government has been increasingly subject to the strident demands of vested interests.</i></p>
The elites	<p>People with Arts degrees; people who don’t have real jobs; public school teachers; Fairfax and ABC journalists; people who regularly read books; Greens voters; public servants; inner-city dwellers; vegans; lawyers; left-wing academics; the openly homosexual; not big business.</p> <p><i>The elites are out of touch with ordinary, decent Australians.</i></p>
Guilt industry	<p>People and organisations that benefit from government grants to address social disadvantage; people who acknowledge unpleasant episodes in Australian or European history; people who question US foreign policy.</p> <p><i>The government is being held hostage by the guilt industry, against the common sense views of mainstream Australia.</i></p>

Dog whistle	Translation
Navel gazing	<p>Concentrating too heavily on unpleasant episodes of history, such as the treatment of Indigenous people or homosexuals, rather than emphasising its positive aspects, such as Australia's military heritage or sporting prowess.</p> <p><i>This navel gazing does nothing to improve the lot of today's Aboriginal communities.</i></p>
Un-Australian	<p>People who don't believe in a fair go; ethnic thugs; corporations which don't honour their entitlements to employees.</p> <p><i>Beating up a lifeguard is just un-Australian.</i></p>
Political correctness	<p>The need to self-censor due to the power of the elites and the vested interests; what is wrong with modern Australia.</p> <p><i>The scourge of political correctness means that ordinary, decent Australians are afraid to speak up for common sense.</i></p>
Thought police	<p>Elites and members of the guilt industry who monitor public statements for political correctness.</p> <p><i>You can't say what you think in this country anymore because the thought police might get you.</i></p>
Resentment	<p>The idea that ordinary people have been shut out of debate by the elites, special interests and political correctness; unfounded suspicion; bigotry; racism.</p> <p><i>Australians naturally feel resentment when they hear stories about people abusing the welfare system.</i></p>
Black armband view of history	<p>An 'interpretation' of Australian history which gives no credit to the hardships endured by white settlers, but instead emphasises the violent takeover of Aboriginal land and the theft of Aboriginal children; similarly negative or revisionist versions of international history (for instance regarding US foreign policy).</p> <p><i>Those who hold a black armband view of history are working against practical reconciliation in this country.</i></p>
Black armband brigade	<p>People who hold a black armband view of history; the guilt industry.</p> <p><i>The black armband brigade wants to hold the government to ransom for what happened before any of us were born.</i></p>

Dog whistle	Translation
Doomsday scenario	<p>The international scientific consensus regarding the likely effects of climate change; any contingency that might affect the mining or forestry industries; any contingency that might affect the ability of big business to make money.</p> <p><i>The environmentalists are predicting a doomsday scenario, but the government needs to be practical and consider the economic consequences of addressing climate change.</i></p>
National emergency	<p>A situation requiring immediate and drastic action to prevent ‘them’ from undermining Australian values or the Australian way of life.</p> <p><i>Children need to be protected from abuse. This is a national emergency.</i></p>
Practical reconciliation	<p>The opposite to ‘symbolic reconciliation’ (i.e. apologising to the stolen generation and acknowledging other past wrongs committed against Aborigines), which would open up the government to vexatious compensation claims; an ‘idea in which the adjective is lethal to the noun’.</p> <p><i>I support practical reconciliation, such as helping Aboriginal people to achieve the great Australian dream of owning their own home.</i></p>
Ethnic thugs	<p>Lebanese gangs; Bulldogs supporters.</p> <p><i>The behaviour of these ethnic thugs is un-Australian and they should be locked up.</i></p>
Gangs	<p>Groups of young people of Muslim, Aboriginal or (sometimes) Asian background.</p> <p><i>Police will be given all the resources they need to deal with these gangs.</i></p>
Illegal immigrants/ illegals	<p>People fleeing persecution in war-torn countries who seek asylum in Australia and who have managed to land on mainland Australian soil; queue-jumpers.</p> <p><i>Our border protection measures are in place to ensure that we process the claims of illegals without jeopardising the integrity of our immigration system.</i></p>
Queue-jumper	<p>People fleeing persecution in war-torn countries who seek asylum in Australia and who have not applied in writing through an Australian embassy and waited their turn to receive an official response; illegals; people like that.</p> <p><i>The queue-jumpers are taking advantage of our generosity.</i></p>

Dog whistle	Translation
People like that	<p>People who throw their children overboard; people who rape our women; Muslims.</p> <p><i>We don't want people like that in this country.</i></p>
Border protection	<p>Measures to secure Australia from people like that; vigilance against drug-smuggling, illegal fishing and fruit and vegetable contraband.</p> <p><i>Today I am announcing tougher border protection measures to protect Australia against external threats.</i></p>
Cut and run	<p>Abandon one's mates in a time of war; display cowardice in foreign policy; be un-Australian.</p> <p><i>If we cut and run, the terrorists will win. We need to stay the course for the sake of freedom and democracy.</i></p>
Be alert but not alarmed	<p>Be afraid of terrorists, and anyone who looks like a terrorist – an attack is expected any day now.</p> <p><i>BE ALERT BUT NOT ALARMED. If you see something unusual or suspicious in your neighbourhood or workplace, use your judgement and common sense. If it doesn't add up, ring up.</i></p>
Personal responsibility	<p>The strength of character required to hold down a job, raise children properly or obey the law; what the unemployed, drug addicts and criminals don't have; what 'they' don't have.</p> <p><i>Don't be a job snob. Have some personal responsibility rather than relying on taxpayers to support your lifestyle.</i></p>
Nanny state	<p>Government policy that promotes vested interests over personal responsibility.</p> <p><i>In the nanny state, ordinary, hardworking taxpayers end up supporting the lifestyles of people who don't take responsibility for themselves.</i></p>

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