

# Hawker Britton

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| **government** relations | **strategic** communications | **campaigns** |

## The Media – A Rolling Stone?

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Does the way the media deals with an issue influence all politicians in their decisions? Are they more or less honest because of these dealings? What can be done to effect positive outcomes?

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## OPENING

One of the questions I've been asked to answer is whether all politicians let the media influence their decisions.

And I have a pretty simple answer to that one: Only the successful ones.

I've been privileged to work with some very successful politicians – and for that matter some unsuccessful ones too.

The most media savvy politician I've worked with is NSW Premier Bob Carr. And today he becomes the longest continuous serving premier of that state. So, I will spend some of my time today looking at his approach to the media – because it has clearly worked for Bob.

The biggest asset Carr brought to the leadership of the NSW ALP – at its low point in 1988 – was his training as a journalist. He knew the power of the media – and he harnessed it. He knew he had to grab the attention of the press gallery and start setting the political agenda.

To do this he turned his staff into a team of investigative journalists and set them loose – chasing down leads, using informants and obtaining documents wherever and however they could.

I'll look at this question a bit more closely later, but Carr in Opposition was the first leader to systematically use this approach in politics. In doing so he harnessed the power of the media for his benefit.

But first, how important is the media to you today?

Well, at no time has media scrutiny of Australian politicians been greater.

Let's briefly examine the sheer volume of media in this country.

In Australia, we have five national Television networks – four have at least three full news bulletins a day, three have daily current affairs programmes, two have breakfast news shows.

There are three in depth programmes – *Four Corners*, *Sunday* and *Insight* - while each of the big four networks have Sunday interview shows.

Plus there's a 24 hour-a-day TV news network – Sky TV - on cable.

On the radio side of things there are around 80 stations in capital cities plus approximately 250 regional stations.

Of this group no less than three national networks - ABC local radio, Southern Cross and Macquarie - are devoted purely to news and information. ABC local radio alone has 55 stations throughout Australia.

This level of competition means journalists are under intense pressure to break new stories and freshen up old ones.

Let's look at a typical slow news day – no major catastrophes. The morning newspapers are full of drought, Sydney rail chaos, battlers trying to make ends meet.

On breakfast radio the Prime Minister says he feels for those affected by drought – that's a story.

Or the NSW Premier says he understands the anger of rail commuters – that's a story.

Or Peter Costello says he's a working class hero – now that's a story!

And for each one of those stories someone's going to have to respond.

So by the 9am radio news bulletin, we hear:

"Why hasn't the Government done something about the drought/the rail network/the tax system?"

from the Opposition, or a community leader, or an academic.

The old saying "no news is good news" just doesn't apply anymore.

There is no such thing in Australia today as "No News".

The intensity of journalistic competition does not allow for the concept of "No News".

In Australia if you're in public life you're either in the news, you're about to be in the news...

Or you're very clever.

And the best tip I can give you if you're dealing with the media in Australia - try to get on the front foot.

The biggest challenge for people in government today is how to deal with the unprecedented levels of transparency and political accountability.

The media has so many port holes into the ship of state that politicians and public servants are in constant crisis management or developing risk aversion strategies.

23 years ago when I started working for the NSW government, there were relatively modest levels of accountability – an auditor-general, various parliamentary committees and an ombudsman.

Consider the list today: ICAC, Police Integrity Commission, Administrative Decisions Tribunal, Health Care Complaints Commission, Freedom of Information laws, Public Accounts Committee, Auditor-General, Ombudsman, Crimes Commission, various pecuniary interest registers...And for local government – open councils.

All of these are possible sources of juicy stories which can stop promising careers in their tracks.

Potentially every word you put on a file is FOI-able and could appear on the front page of your local metropolitan daily.

Think of that when you sit down to pen your next report or recommendation – how would this read on the front page? I call this the Sydney Morning Herald test.

Political oppositions and the media work hand in glove to find embarrassing stories.

When I was in State opposition for seven years, every day one thought dominated: How can we use the media to put the government on the back foot?

And the results were remarkable.

- Scandals like Matt Singleton, the Minister who lobbied the Planning Minister to change the zoning on his own land;
- Tony Packard, the used car salesman turned politician who had bugged customers' conversations to see what they would pay for a car;
- The Metherell affair which led to Premier Greiner's resignation when Metherell traded his seat in parliament for a public service job; and
- Barrie Morris, who was convicted of leaving bomb threats at the Blue Mountains Gazette. Was there ever a starker example of bad local media management?

These stories and many more demonstrate the consequences of ignoring the power of the media. Careers ruined, a government discredited, because they failed to stay in control. In the end, the opposition, through the media, controlled the agenda by colouring public opinion.

Whether you're playing offence or defence, there's really one rule you need to get your head round: **STAY IN CONTROL.**

Let's look at how to do that.

In Peter Beattie's first term there were serious allegations of branch stacking and swearing false declarations against his Deputy Premier and two MPs.

The allegations led to the Shepherdson inquiry.

Beattie got on the front foot, and sided with the public. He sacked MPs, and embarked on a listening tour. He travelled round Queensland, looking serious, talking tough. He called an early election, and won a huge majority.

And another: in 1998, the Giardia bug was found in Sydney's water. Residents warned to boil all drinking water.

This was only two years out from the Olympics, and represented a huge potential human and political disaster.

Immediately, Carr appeared in the media, looking angry.

He warned that those found responsible would be sacked.

Carr pledged compensation for citizens.

In doing so, he turned it into a *management* issue, not a government issue: "If something like this, with all its implications for customers and the public, happened in the private sector, the managers would be removed without ceremony. Now the same will happen here," he said.

"It wouldn't matter if the President himself was in town, the fact is at any time you are entitled to turn on the tap - the humble citizen - to turn on the tap and have clean, safe water come out of it," he said.

And heads rolled.

Like Peter Beattie, Carr sided with an angry public - he did not blindly defend the indefensible - thereby quelling much public and media anger about the incident.

The water crisis is now considered a case study in effective crisis management.

## **UNDERSTAND YOUR AIMS**

Never lose sight of this fact: People in government - at whatever level - *need* the media. The media is your primary means of disseminating information, ideas, argument and policy.

It's important to remember that it is a *professional* relationship.

While you should maintain good relations with the media - and I'll get to that later - they are not your friends, and you are not their friend.

You are using them to achieve your goals, just as they are using you to reach theirs.

## **UNDERSTAND THE MEDIA'S AIMS**

Note that the media, and the public, are particularly interested in negative coverage.

Remember the 1993 Federal election? Hewson v Keating? Hewson had a raft of policy, but Keating managed to make it into a single-issue election: the GST.

Keating attacked the GST mercilessly, just honed in on that one thing, then the media picked it up, and in the end, Hewson lost the unloseable election.

Similarly, in the recent Federal campaign, Labor got lost in the detail of its policies – explaining and defending private school funding cuts, its family allowance policy and Medicare Gold.

And from John Howard, a simple message from start to finish: “Who do *you trust* to run the economy, maintain security and keep interest rates down?”

It’s simple, it’s clear, and it’s effective.

As Golda Meir said: “Once you have to explain, you’ve lost the argument.”

So, when dealing with journalists, keep your message simple, clear and easily understood – otherwise the media and your detractors will pull your message apart bit by bit.

## **NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL PAPERS**

Greg Barns, who ran the campaign for the Australian Republican Movement, is fond of saying that research has shown that people read their local newspapers in more depth than they do the big daily papers.

People connect with things they know – local connections. So getting messages into local newspapers is essential.

On one occasion, I was in south-west Sydney observing a focus group of about 11 voters.

We asked them whether they read the Sydney Morning Herald. One nervously put up his hand – he bought it for the job ads.

We asked them how many read the Telegraph. A sprinkling of hands went up - most of them only read it on weekends.

We asked them how many read their local papers – every single one of them put up their hands.

Think about what this means.

It raises the distinct possibility that local government – not the Premiers, not the Federal Opposition Leader, not even the Prime Minister – are being read about, analysed and scrutinised in more depth than anybody else in this country.

It’s easy to forget how important local papers are.

They seem small, with low-paid part-time staff, small circulations...but unlike the big dailies, *people read them from cover to cover*.

When they read about the opening of the local school, they know the school, they’ve been there, their kids are educated there, and they remember it. When they hear you’re closing down their local carpark, they remember that too.

Local papers allow their readers to make local connections, which in turn imprints an image in their mind – which they remember.

### THINK LOCAL, ACT LOCAL

People are always saying "Think global, act local." I don't think many people think globally anymore.

I'm not insulting them here. Globalisation has left us with a sense that we have lost control over the wider environment. We don't feel we can do anything about oil prices, or the war in Sudan, or Iraq.

So what we really start to care about are the things right under our noses. The things that affect us directly. And the things that we can influence.

This brings local government into the community's sights.

They're interested in whether they get a carpark at *their* shopping centre.

Or whether you decide to build an abattoir down the road from *their* house.

Or whether *their* local playground gets new play equipment.

These issues, the ones that editors of big papers, and producers of TV news, decide are too small and unimportant for them to touch, are the ones that people really get worked up about.

In Sydney, anything which potentially affects the value of people's property is of vital interest.

So never, ever think that as a local councillor or officer people aren't watching you. They are.

Why is this?

Australians in recent years have enjoyed unprecedented and extended prosperity. This has coincided with a federal government intent on social restructuring, and reducing if not dismantling the welfare state – reduced reliance on Medicare, higher HECS charges, work-for-the-dole, tougher disability pension requirements.

In re-electing John Howard for a fourth term, Australians have largely bargained a strong welfare state away for the promise of ongoing growth, high wages and the nest egg second property, to see them through their old age.

In Sydney at least this certainly has them thinking locally!

That means the local media has unprecedented influence and power. Ignore it at your peril.

So, Stay in control



This is at the heart of everything I'm talking about today. It's all about being on the front foot.

Next, Build up networks

Working with the media is just like working with any other industry. The better your personal contacts, the more success you are likely to have with them.

If you're fair and polite to them, remember their names and who they work for, and even better, try to *meet* them occasionally, they're going to find it harder to stick the boot into you.

Occasionally give them an exclusive – make them want you!

On the other hand, if you treat them poorly or disrespectfully, they'll quickly develop a vendetta, and do everything they can to make your life difficult.

Speed

Tony Blair, the most successful British Labour Prime Minister ever, was famous for having a rapid response team whose job it was to constantly monitor the media.

In 1989, when I worked on the Goss campaign, I was the only "outsider" there when Premier Russell Cooper launched his campaign. I was dispatched to "sit in" on the campaign speech (which was open to the public). I got a copy of the speech at the back of the hall that was there for journos, and Goss was responding before Cooper had sat down.

The simple message: be prepared to work fast. And be prepared to demolish your opponent's arguments quickly.

## **HOW TO DEAL WITH THE MEDIA – DETAILED ADVICE**

So, as I said before, if you're in government – any sort of government – there are two things you could be doing: selling your programs or defending them.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

### **SELLING YOUR STORY**

In this situation, you're trying to get journalists to pick your story up. This isn't easy. They have a million and one tales each day, and, as I said, they often prefer the negative ones.

But you're trying to sell them a positive story.

So there's essentially one BIG rule here: Recognise what journalists want, and try to facilitate it.

Give them everything you think they might want, and they are far more likely to run with your side of the story.

## **THIS MEANS...**

Start with a “hook”. You need to have *something* to sell your story with: an interesting event, quotation or idea. For a TV station, hooks are different – find a good visual idea that you can give them.

Ask yourself: would I read/watch/listen to this story? If not, then rework it.

Give them as many facts as you can.

Back those facts up – specify where they come from, and what their importance is. If a journalist has to make a phone call to verify a fact, then you haven’t done your job properly.

Add usable quotations – quotations that sound like somebody speaking, not like somebody sitting down at their typewriter.

Have a concise, well-worded press release.

Put your sharp, smart quotes in the release.

Sprinkle some facts and figures through the release so it contains a compelling case.

## **DEFENDING YOUR POLICY**

This is much harder. You are operating in a crisis. Somebody has attacked you – perhaps journalists themselves.

Journalists are like sharks. They can smell your fear. As soon as you look like you’re out of control, they will pounce.

So remember: **TAKE CONTROL**

## **THIS MEANS...**

Know your facts. Ask yourself: what are *all* the questions I could possibly get asked. Have an answer for each of them.

WRITE THEM DOWN. Have a record of them.

Work out what you want to communicate.

If there is a problem, make sure you have a workable solution.

Think about how the media will react.

Try to pre-empt their questions.

Rehearse your press conference.

Have colleagues or staff throw difficult questions at you.

Just as you do when selling your policy, make sure there is something easy for the media to hook onto. The bigger the hook, the more likely they are to run your side of the story without alteration.

Disseminate these answers to anybody likely to deal with the media. It is important for your organisation to be cohesive in the face of a crisis.

Most importantly, DO NOT LIE. If you don't know an answer to a question, then say so: "I'll have to get back to you on that." "I'll have an answer for you tomorrow." If you lie, you will get trapped, and you will lose all credibility.

### **CASE STUDY – JOHN HOWARD. FOCUS: LANGUAGE**

Let's have a look at John Howard, and how he uses language in his dealings with the media.

He is a Master Media Manipulator.

Let's look very closely at his language use, and then try to draw some lessons.

#### **SEMANTICS**

John Howard is very good at not lying.

He is a lawyer at heart, and it comes out in his speech.

He recognises the importance of language.

He has introduced semantics into Australian political dialogue, and made them an unavoidable part of the political landscape.

His use of legalistic language enables him to avoid committing firmly to anything, which in turn gives him *plausible deniability*.

Let's look at his language when advancing his party's position on interest rates, which helped him win the last election.

Here's what he said in his campaign launch: "It's a historic fact that over the last 30 years, interest rates under Labor governments have always gone up because Labor governments spend more than they collect, and drive budgets into deficit. So it will be with a Labor Latham government.

"If interest rates . . . were to rise to the average of what they were under previous Labor governments, that would add an additional \$960 a month to the average mortgage of the average Australian family."

Note that he never directly says that a Latham government would drive interest rates up so far as to add \$960 a month to an average mortgage.

He just carefully steps around the issue, and leaves you with that figure in your mind - \$960.

Later, he told Channel Nine: "...every time we've had a Labor Government interest rates have gone through the roof because Labor Governments always go into deficit, they always spend more than they collect, they also run risky economic policies."

AGAIN, just stepping around it.

And this year when interest rates went up under his government, he was able to deny ever saying they would not go up under the Liberals. Rather, he could say that they were more likely to go up under a Labor government.

This way of using language is spreading.

Julian Burnside was at a public meeting in April 2002, and asked Philippa Godwin, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Immigration, a question about a fence that surrounds the Baxter Detention Centre. The fence is described on a plan of Baxter as a 'courtesy fence'. Burnside suggested that it was in fact an electric fence. 'No,' she insisted. 'It is not an electric fence. It is an energised fence.' As Burnside said: a 9000-volt energised fence!

So, what lessons can we take from John Howard?

First and foremost, **USE LANGUAGE DELIBERATELY**

**AND USE LANGUAGE CAREFULLY.**

Think about things before you say them.

Think about the words you choose, whether you really mean to say exactly what you're saying, and what the implications of those words are.

Be careful. John Howard is.

## **FRAMEWORKS**

Another useful approach is to develop *frameworks* to emphasise key issues to the media.

There should be several messages that you want to get across to your audience.

I don't mean specific programs. We're not talking about a particular new school, or demolishing a particular carpark.

We're talking broad themes.

George Lakoff, a linguist from the US, says that picking the right frames is the single most important thing in politics. Frames evoke a world view.

John Howard has developed some strong frames in his time.

"A strong economy".

"There are serious threats to our national security".

"Greater choice for Australians".

Think about what the most important frames for you are.

They might be "Efficient government". Or "Caring for your family".

Pick some, then connect everything back to them.

Anything you say to the media should back up one of these frames in some way.

## **PLAYING OFFENSIVE DEFENCE**

John Howard has interesting ways of debating. He will pick a particular detail of an argument which he can attack, and then exaggerate its importance to the overall argument.

This cleverly enables him to avoid having to attack the entire argument.

## **TIMING**

Your announcement can also help you get your message across. Howard made his comments about interest rate policy at his federal election campaign launch – an event that was always going to get a lot of attention. And so those comments played over and over and over again for the rest of the campaign.

John Howard also knows when to hit back at negative stories.

A short news cycle means you have to move quickly – and Howard does.

He also knows that the news cycle is even faster in the morning, and that's when you need to hit things fastest.

For local media, it might be a bit different. Their news cycles are slower.

Nevertheless, know what those cycles are – ask the journalists and they'll tell you – and make sure you work to them. Give them news so they have enough time to get it in the very next issue of the paper, or radio program, or whatever.

There are 10 major daily newspapers based in the capital cities, and nine Sunday papers.

And then there are a host of regional and suburban papers - 200 publications in NSW alone.

Ten years ago the media used to talk about 24 hour news cycles. If the media picked up a story, it would last a full day on radio and television.

Those days are long gone.

The radio and television news cycle is now just three hours during the day and probably just one hour in the morning.

That puts pressure on the journalists to put pressure on you!

## CONCLUSION

So, on this day when I for one recognise Bob Carr's remarkable achievement as the longest serving Premier in NSW history, what conclusions can I draw?

In a nutshell it is this:

*Recognise* the power of the media.

*Understand* the demands placed on journalists by their editors.

*Acknowledge* their right, indeed obligation, to report and interpret politics and government.

And most importantly – do not wait for others to set the agenda.

Do it yourself.

Take control.

Thank you.