

AN AUSTRALIAN PR STATE?

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Abstract

In their 1994 study Taxation and Representation, Deacon and Golding point to the extensive use of press and public relations professionals by governments to promote policy, and to out manoeuvre their opponents. With the UK specifically in mind they warn “we cannot ignore the massive expansion of the public relations state” (p.6). What distinguishes their approach from the more usual preoccupation with the use of ‘spin’ to “package” political leaders is a focus on the institutionalisation of public relations within government. In this paper I explore the utility of the concept, and consider what the broad features of an Australian “PR state” might be.

A PR state?

In their 1994 study *Taxation and representation*, David Deacon and Peter Golding point to the extensive use of media advisers and communications professionals by governments to promote policy and to out manoeuvre their opponents. With the UK in specifically in mind, but citing Gandy's (1982, p.74) observation that in the USA information specialists “at every level of government, [and] in every agency” also play a key role in the “formulation and implementation of public policy”, they warn “we cannot ignore the massive expansion of the public relations state” (Deacon & Golding 1994, pp.5-6). “All governments”, they acknowledge, “like to be well thought of” and are therefore fond of publicity campaigns. However their conception of a PR state is based upon the more specific point that “in recent decades the scale and ferocity of this aspect of public life have escalated substantially” (Deacon & Golding 1994, p.4).

News media, Deacon and Golding (1994, p.199) argue, will routinely shape the “conduct of political debate” not only by “informing public opinion” but also by ‘shaping the political strategies’ pursued by key policy stakeholders. Where competing stakeholders clamour for influence, the media can “have a strategic role” in promoting a particular policy solution (Deacon & Golding 1994, p.4). Governments have learned this lesson and substantially stepped up their own investment in promotion and information management. They have “become a major employer of press and public relations activists, and of advertising” and constructed their own “apparatus of spin doctors” (Deacon & Golding 1994, pp.4 & 6). More than this, the “marketing of government activity has become a central activity of modern statecraft” (Deacon & Golding 1994, p.7). In the process, the unwritten convention that “publicly funded publicity campaigns should not stray into the realms of party politics” has been called into question, and the “conventional division between public information and party propaganda” has been blurred (Deacon & Golding 1994, p.65).

What distinguishes Deacon and Golding's approach to government publicity is that they eschew the more commonplace preoccupation with the use of ‘spin’ to “package” political leaders. Instead they focus on the institutionalisation of public

relations within government. In this paper I argue that their concept provides a useful tool with which to analyse political communication in Australia. However it needs be said that the case Deacon and Golding make for studying the PR state as a means of advancing political communication research seems to have fallen on barren soil. Since the publication of *Taxation and representation* others have only occasionally employed the concept. For example Ian Sommerville (2001, p.28) asks whether Britain is indeed a public relations state in order to draw attention “to the processes and procedures by which government agencies disseminate the information they want us to receive”. Similarly Kuhn (2000, p.3) suggests that, since 1997, the Blair Government has taken “the idea of the public relations state to new heights” by entrenching “news management as an integral part of contemporary governance”.

However, for the most part Deacon and Golding’s warning to heed the expanding PR state has made little impact within the field. There may be several reasons for this. The central part of Deacon and Golding’s 1994 book is a study of the Thatcher Government’s proposal to introduce a Community Charge (or poll tax). By their own admission this campaign was a “political failure” and the Government’s efforts to manage and “control that political debate” were “compromised” despite the advantages it enjoyed (Deacon & Golding 1994, p.200). Their account of a public relations state may have attracted rather more interest had they chosen to study an issue over which the government had been able to use its resources to successfully manage and shape political debate. It is also true that Deacon and Golding do not make the public relations state central to their inquiry in *Taxation and representation*, and that neither appears to have subsequently pursued the concept in their later work.

In his *Public relations democracy* Aeron Davis (2000, pp.9-10) rejects the concept of the PR state, pointing out that, in Britain, government and parties between them “account for less than a sixth of total PR employment”. His essential objection is that a “focus on institutional politics ignores the activities of numerous other groups” such as businesses, business associations, pressure groups, unions and charities, many of whom “spend significant funds on their public relations” and wield a real influence over policy. Davis’ (2000, p.9) wider argument is that “mainstream political communication” fails to fully describe the “ways political communication affects the political process” because it has a too “heavy emphasis on elections and party campaign machines” and a too narrow fascination with the “‘professionalisation’ of government and political party communications, [and] the development of the ‘public relations state’”. Notice that Davis treats analysis of the PR state as an extension of the study of the highly professional campaigns that parties now conduct in search of electoral victory. This is a linkage which Deacon and Golding clearly reject.

Deacon and Golding (1994, p.201) draw attention to the PR state precisely because they see a “need to loosen the stranglehold that elections studies still exert on the imagination of political communication research”. Davis (2000, p.9) rightly argues that elections are “extremely unrepresentative periods” and cover but a “small period of time in the cycle of government”. Deacon and Golding (1994, 2001) fully concur, noting that the “freneticism” of elections “makes them unusual, atypical periods”. Indeed it is precisely because they recognise that elections are short-lived and unrepresentative political moments having little to do with the “substance of policy making” that Deacon and Golding argue that there is a need to more closely examine the advantages governments have, and the ongoing ways in which they will seek to

manage and control “public discourses on political issues”. Here is a convincing argument for examining the PR state, and one that equally applies in Australia’s case. Election campaigns may be an ideal opportunity to study political “spin”, but “spin doctors” continue to ply their trade long after the last ballots are cast. Governments nowadays well understand the importance of “an effective public relations strategy in securing public acceptance of ... policy” and will concentrate their resources to this end (Deacon & Golding 1994, p.45). Indeed as Bob Franklin (1994, p.111) observes—in taking up Deacon and Golding’s central point, if not expressly employing their concept of a PR state—central government has shown a “new found enthusiasm for using advertising, marketing and public relations campaigns to sell ... policies to the public” and for integrating or “packaging” the political communication activities of its various arms and agencies.

Exploring the Australian PR state

A full exploration of the Australian PR state may require case studies comparable with Deacon and Golding’s detailed scrutiny of the Thatcher Government’s efforts to sell its poll tax policy in the late 1980s. (The last several years offer ample possibilities. The Howard Government has overseen substantial campaigns directed at promoting and bedding down its goods and services tax or GST; at promoting the take-up of private health insurance; and at alerting, but not alarming, Australians about the threat posed by terrorism.) Here I address the more limited task of mapping the central features of the Australian PR state. This is equally important. While there is a legitimate place for the study of how parties and governments practice public relations—of the means of “packaging” of politicians (Franklin 1994) or of the covert and overt public relations “manoeuvres” (Tiffen 1989) that politicians will use—it is equally important to examine the institutional framework which allows governments to coordinate and implement campaigns intended to steer, or manage, policy debates. If the (problematic) debate about “new institutionalism” has a single lesson it is that the institutional context shapes the way in which political actors understand issues and frame political strategies (see Weller 2000). It is from political institutions that the social norms, networks, and beliefs, which are crucial to explaining much of what occurs in modern political systems, spring.

Describing the institutional framework of an Australian PR state is made all the more difficult by Australia’s federal system. Just as Deacon and Golding (1994, p.7) note that local governments in Britain commonly employ “public relations officers, [and] publicity units”, Australian State governments have also shown a similar inclination to systematically utilise media advice, advertising and public relations. In this paper I focus only upon the Commonwealth or national government. In brief, four main topographical features define the landscape of the Australian PR state. These are the media “minders” who are now an institutionalised feature of the personal staff of ministers; “media units” composed of journalists hired to coordinate the government’s media relations and to monitor news coverage of the government and Opposition alike; the various public affairs sections found within public service departments through which ministers are able to direct major publicity campaigns; and the integrating instruments which provide a “whole of government” coordination of the Commonwealth’s promotional activities.

Media Minders

The employment of press secretaries and the establishment of “prime ministerial and government press publicity and relations” have been traced to 1918 (Lloyd 1998, p.3; Lloyd 1992, p.126). By the early 1930s it had become the “established practice that prime ministers should recruit a senior journalist to serve as a press secretary in their private office” (Lloyd 1992, p.126) and thereafter this practice was gradually extended to include other senior ministers. The short-lived 1972-75 Whitlam Government set a precedent in supplying all ministers with a press secretary (although the subsequent Fraser Government did not immediately follow this path.¹) Presently the Howard Government is served by some three-dozen “media advisers” who together account for one in every ten ministerial staffers.² The Prime Minister, alone, has a Senior Communications Adviser, a Senior Media Adviser and a Press Secretary on his eighteen-strong staff.

Most minders are now styled “media advisers” rather than press secretaries in recognition that broadcast rather than print media are now the major channels of political communication, and to flag the fact that most now have a quite different set of skills. Originally the role of press secretaries mostly involved writing political speeches and press releases. Over time their role evolved just as their numbers multiplied. Media advisers now routinely prepare news releases, deal with inquiries from journalists, plan doorstops and other media events and monitor media coverage. Furthermore, as the broadcast media—especially TV—have assumed greater political importance, media advisers have been increasingly drawn into providing strategic advice about how best to “manage” political news. Rob Chalmers joined the Canberra Press gallery in 1951. Four decades on, he considers that “the big difference is the manipulation of news” (*Lateline*, 12 August 1998). Other journalists have made much the same point. For example the ABC’s Kerry O’Brien believes that press secretaries have become adept at selectively targeting “networks, stations and interviewers” and that their handling of television is far more calculating than twenty years ago (Courtis 2001, p.9).

Writing in 1992 with the prime minister’s office in mind, Clem Lloyd (1992, p.127) argues that press secretaries actually have “little responsibility for the co-ordination of overall government presentation and media strategy”. Rather this co-ordination, he argues, is achieved through media units. Lloyd’s argument needs to be carefully weighed. It is true that Australian politics have generated no equivalent figure to Tony Blair’s director of communications and chief spin doctor, the “formidable” Alastair Campbell (Sommerville 2002, p.27; also see Grattan 1998, p.33). Nor do Australian media advisers “cruise the lobbies ... like celebrities” and as “players in their own right” with responsibilities well beyond “getting the party message across”, as one columnist written of their British counterparts (Iain MacWhirter cited in McNair 2000, p.129). However it is equally true, as Richard Phillipps (2001, p.2) points out, that in Australia “media advisers occupy a key role between ministers, government departments and the media”. As one former staffer observes, information “pours” into a minister’s office. In addition to departmental briefs there are “daily

¹ Ian Holland (2002, p.9) points out that the “Fraser ministry employed far fewer press secretaries in individual ministers’ offices” although it was also served by the Government Information Unit.

² In 1999 the Howard Government employed 34 media advisers (Holland 2002, p.9). As of 30 May 2002 it employed 36 media advisers comprising 10 percent of a total ministerial staff of 365.6 (*CPD Senate* 30 May 2002, pp.416 & 420).

media cuts to be studied and digested” as well as written and oral material from policy stakeholders. Ministerial advisers sift through this material “putting on the spin [or] finding supporting evidence for political arguments and policy positions”. This is “generally the province of a press secretary” who has overall responsibility for portraying “the government and its actions in the best possible light” (Barnes 2002, p.4).³ On this evidence, media advisers may not be centrally involved in shaping strategy but they do do much of the mundane work which effective media management requires.

Phillipp’s argument that media minders play a key role between ministers, departments and the media is also borne out by the role played by Ross Hampton during Operation Relex (better known as the “children overboard” affair). Hampton was the press secretary of the then Minister of Defence, Peter Reith. During the 2001 election campaign the Government had targeted “illegal” asylum seekers and preservation of Australia’s border integrity as key issues. The navy was charged with preventing any further “boat people” from reaching Australia’s shores, and as a consequence of its efforts at sea, the Department of Defence public affairs office found itself besieged by media inquiries. However at the Minister’s direction all defence personnel “were forbidden from making contact with the media” (Weller 2002, p.83). “All media inquiries were to be directed to Hampton” who aimed to “ensure that any coverage of the refugees was couched in terms favourable to ... the government” and that “every news statement had ... the imprint of the government’s message” (Weller 2002, p.73). Hampton had a dedicated phone-line to Defence public affairs and “would ring ten to fifteen times a day and get absolute priority” (Weller 2002, p.83). Pat Weller (2002, p.73) says of Hampton: “The media wanted comment, pictures, and the most recent reports. His job was to get them and then ‘spin them’.” It seems clear from these events that media advisers like Hampton serve on the front line of the Australian PR state.

Media Units

Governments are free to employ and assign ministerial media advisers under the 1984 *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act* as they see fit, and recent governments have organised their media and information functions quite differently. However both Labor and Coalition governments alike have supplemented those media minders appointed to ministers’ offices by establishing “media units for gathering or disseminating information” (Holland 2002, p.9). It is within these units that Lloyd (1992, p.127) suggests that overall government media strategy is determined. Certainly they have a hand in the routine management of the government’s overall media relations. Perhaps the best-known media unit is still the National Media Liaison Service. It served the Hawke and Keating Labor governments between 1983 and 1996 and was dubbed—a variation of its acronym as well as testimony to its aggressive promotion of the government—the “aNiMaLS” by Press Gallery journalists.⁴

³ Terry Barnes worked as senior adviser to the Minister of Health in the first Howard Government.

⁴ The National Media Liaison Service replaced a similar media unit, which had served the Fraser Government, and which Labor disbanded. See Greg Terrill (2000, pp.174-5) and Ward (1995, pp.10-1).

The aNiMaLS employed some 23 staff working either in Canberra or in the various State capitals (Terrill 2000, p.175). Most were journalists, and ostensibly their role was to assist the government publicise its policy program and to provide a whole-of-government media relations.⁵ However Michelle Grattan (1998 p.41) argues that spin “requires a very good filing system, and a very good monitoring procedure” and that, in fact, the National Media Liaison Service ensured that, across Australia, every utterance by the Coalition was monitored, and every politically embarrassing comment rapidly transcribed and provided to the Press Gallery with a suitable story suggestion (also see Cleary 1997, p.15). As the Liberal frontbencher Senator Kemp complained in Parliament, the aNiMaLS’ formal purpose of disseminating information on Government policies and programs to the media masked its real role “of monitoring the activities of the non-Government parties for political purposes” (*CPD Senate* 6 February 1995, p.510). In Opposition the Liberals decried the aNiMaLS as a propaganda unit and pledged to abolish it. On coming to power in 1996 they did so, but only to replace it with their own monitoring arrangements and unit.

Grattan (1998, p.41) observes that the Howard Government’s arrangements are “rather more discreet” although they still provide it with “an extensive ‘listening’ and propaganda machine”. While Grattan claims it has a “discreet” arrangement in place, the Howard Government actually professes to have “nothing anything like the National Media Liaison Service” (*CPD Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee* 3 June 1998, p.311). What it has done is to appoint additional media advisers to the personal staffs of mostly junior ministers in each State.⁶ However it does seem clear from the evidence that the Opposition has gleaned from Estimates Committee hearings that these additional media advisers work closely with the PM’s office, and that they routinely supply Howard’s senior minister adviser with transcripts of media interviews given by Labor politicians where these offer the government a political advantage.⁷ The ALP and Press Gallery journalists (e.g. Tingle 1998, p.6) have blithely dubbed this hidden media unit the “baby animals” in acknowledgement that it fulfills a media monitoring role resembling that of Labor’s aNiMaLS.

⁵ The NMLS operated alongside a second body known as the Ministerial Media Group. The MMG also comprised a dozen additional journalists who were not assigned to individual ministers but whose brief was to support the government by writing news releases, liaising with the news media and by preparing speeches. From May 1985 onward the two bodies were placed under a single director and their activities co-ordinated (*CPD House of Representatives* 19 September 1985, p.1526. Also see *CPD Senate* 14 October 1991, p.3288).

⁶ For a considered review of the Coalition’s claim that it has no equivalent of the NMLS, and of the contrary evidence, see Holland (2002, fn 63).

⁷ In their Minority report appended to the *Budget Estimates 1998-99 Report* Senators Ray and Sherry pointed to “the secretive establishment within Government of a media-monitoring unit.” They noted there “are now at least 12 staff members involved in media-monitoring, with the cost of transcripts being born by the home departments” and that all the evidence indicated that “these 12 operatives report directly to the Prime Minister’s office” (Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee 1998). Also see Cleary (1997) and a press release issued by Senate Faulkner as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate on 4 June, 1998.

In similar vein “Animals II” has been suggested as an appropriate label for a second entity, which was formally established in April 1996, with an initial allocation of ten staff, as the Government Members Secretariat. It shares accommodation alongside the “baby animals” in the ministerial wing of Parliament House some “30 metres from the Prime Minister’s office” (Cleary 1997, p.15). Whilst it has been open about the establishment of this unit, at the beginning of its second term in 1998 the Howard Government transferred the GMS from the Department of Finance and Administration to the Chief Whip’s Office, which, because of the principle of comity between the two houses, removed it from the immediate scrutiny of Senate Estimates committees. The role of the GMS includes training Liberal and National parliamentarians in dealing effectively with the news media, in the “preparation of shell news letters, political pamphlets ... and the production of message documents”— all of which its critics regard as partisan activities not properly “the function of taxpayer funded staff” (*CPD Senate*, 29 June 1998, p.4279).

It is not clear that media units necessarily play the strategic role that Lloyd imagines they do. However, it is clear that the Howard Government found it necessary to retreat from its initial 1996 election promise to disband the National Media Liaison Service. In its place, albeit “in disguised form” (Dodson 1998, p.41), it established both the “baby animals” and Government Members Secretariat, and this suggests an important lesson. It is that media units staffed by professional journalists with the function of “monitoring the media and feeding them with material damaging to the Opposition” (Dodson 1998, p.41) have now become an institutionalised and indispensable feature of the Australian public relations state.

Departmental public affairs sections

Even with their media units in place and performing a monitoring role, in the 1996-97 financial year—their first in office—the Howard Government’s ministers and departments ‘spent almost \$2.5 million ... on [purchasing] electronic media transcripts and newspaper clippings’ from private sector providers (Daley 1997, p.1). This points to a government’s ability to harness the public affairs capacity of the departments and agencies of government over which ministers exercise control, which is a further feature of the PR state.⁸ Each public service department has a public affairs section although the particular designation, size and budgets of departmental public affairs sections will vary. For example in 2001 Environment Australia had a public affairs section with 12 professional staff and a budget of \$1.828 millions.⁹ In the same year the public affairs section in the Attorney-General’s department had a staff of five (*CPD Senate Estimates Committee*, 4 June 2001 p.164 & 29 May p.180). In contrast the public affairs arm of the Department of Defence employed 105 staff and operated with an \$11.6 million budget (Reith gags PR machine, 21 August 2001, p.4).

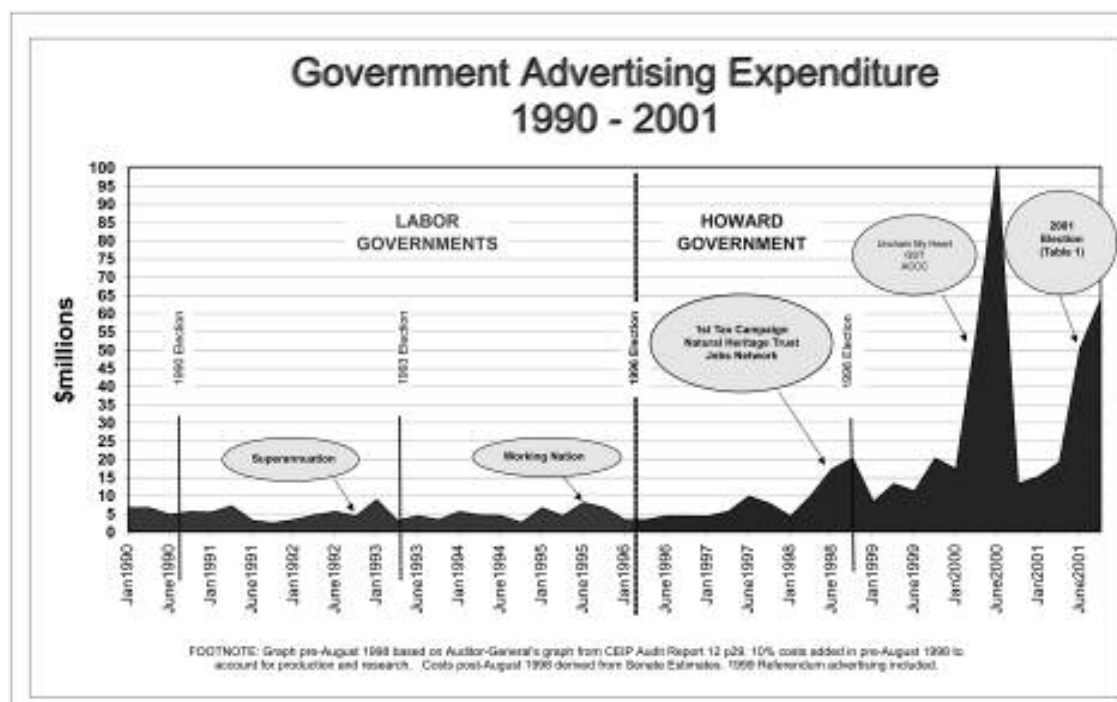
⁸ Media Monitors is one of the two major companies in Australia’s media monitoring industry. Its CEO John Croll says that about “40 percent of its business now comes from government departments” (Parks 2001, p. MO3). Of course this includes State as well as Commonwealth agencies, but it nonetheless points to another facet of the PR state.

⁹ This did not include the Greenhouse Office with its own dedicated media unit and \$1.8 million public affairs budget.

Unlike ministerial media advisers and those in media units such as the GMS who are employed under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act*, departmental public affairs sections are staffed by public servants. Ostensibly they do not serve a party political purpose. However we have already seen how, during the “children overboard” affair, the operation of a departmental public affairs section was directed from the minister’s office to suit his political objective, and it is difficult to imagine that ministers and the governing party do not generally benefit from departmental public relations programs which promote government policy. Greg Terrill (2000, p.159) suggests that these provide the government with an important “policy tool”. As the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO 2002, s.55) rather neutrally acknowledges, “public affairs units may provide advice and support on specific public affairs issues relevant to the requirements of the minister”. This support can involve monitoring “all media coverage of portfolio interests”, and, alongside a minister’s own office and media advisers, dealing with media inquiries and issuing statements.

The ANAO (2002, s.56) also adds that, legitimately, the “public affairs functions at the department agency level may also involve other aspects of public communication, including advertising, marketing, public relations and market research.” It is this capacity of departmental public affairs sections to devise and contract out public communication campaigns that enhances their importance as key features of the Australian PR state. Through this mechanism the government of the day is able to commission private sector pollsters to explore public reaction to policy options, or contract advertising agencies and public relations firms to promote public support for particular policy decisions. In recent years Labor and Liberal-led governments alike have made increasing use of television advertising—often in association with mail-outs and other forms of advertising—to promote public awareness and acceptance of particular policy initiatives. Amongst the most recent is the “Let’s Look Out for Australia” campaign “directly supervised by the Prime Minister” and intended to alert Australians to the risks of terrorist attack (Morris 2002, p. 4).

One especially controversial example of a large scale publicity campaign was the \$15 million Community Education and Information Programme (CEIP) commissioned by the Treasury, and conducted by McCann-Erickson in 1998. It sought to promote the merits of yet-to-be-legislated tax reform immediately prior to the 1998 election in which the Liberal Party made taxation reform and the GST the centrepiece of its own campaign for re-election. The Auditor-General subsequently concluded that the CEIP entailed no breach of any law but that it occupied a grey area given the present absence of guidelines “which distinguish between government program and party-political advertising” (ANAO 1998, p.9. Also see p.11). The graph that follows is based upon data compiled by the Australian National Audit Office for this



report, supplemented by further data obtained by Opposition via Questions on Notice and Senate Estimates committee hearings. It was produced by, and is reproduced with the permission of, the ALP.

This graph suggests the scale of on-going departmental advertising expenditure, and points to an increasing willingness to exploit the advantages of incumbency for electoral advantage.¹⁰ The wider point to be made is that the public affairs sections of departments are plainly key elements of the PR state. This is not to say that departmental affairs sections are a recent phenomenon. Terrill (2000, p.129) shows that while in 1950 there were only three such information units, there were nine in 1970 and, seventeen by 1972, whereafter public affairs established a ubiquitous presence within the national government. The 1975 Coombes Royal Commission found more than 800 public servants engaged in 'specifically-designated public information sections' together spending some \$50 million annually on PR (Ward 1995, p.168). Today current spending is evidently of a considerably higher order, although as Terrill (2000, p.127) observes, definitional difficulties and "inconsistencies in departmental accounting methods" prevent the collection of data that might allow the full extent of government public affairs to be reliably mapped.

"Whole of government" coordination

The emergence of three separate "arms" of the PR state, the proliferation of public affairs sections within departments and other public sector agencies, and the increasing spending on, and importance of, public relations as an integral part of contemporary governance, all point to the need for a whole-of-government integration of government information management activities. In 1982 the Fraser Government

¹⁰ Writing in the *Bulletin* in July 2001, Deborah Light (2001) reported that, ahead of the forthcoming election, the Commonwealth was "outspending major advertisers such as McDonalds" with outlays running at \$20 million a month. It had "campaigns underway for government initiatives including anti-drugs, the pensioner bonus, defence recruitment, new apprenticeships, citizenship and health fund cover" and several more planned. Also see ANAO (1998, Figure 1).

established the Ministerial Committee on Government Communication (MCGC) “to ensure that all government information campaigns ... conform with the government’s priorities” (ANAO 1998, p.8). The MCGC oversees government ‘sensitive’ (GCU 2001) communications, approves strategies for all campaigns over \$100,000, and vets the hiring of PR, advertising, marketing and research consultancies. When the Howard Government came to power in 1996, its immediate appointments to the MCGC included its chairman, the Minister for Administrative Services and Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Senator Minchin, a former SA Liberal party state director; Liberal backbencher and erstwhile Victorian Liberal state director, Petro Geogiou; and Grahame Morris, the then chief political adviser to the Prime Minister. This mix of former Liberal party apparatchiks and advisers directly plugged into Howard’s office signaled an intention to exercise a political control over the Commonwealth government’s wider publicity activities.

The MCGC maintains a busy schedule. For example during 2000-01 it “met on 69 occasions to consider 35 information activities and other matters put to it”, considering, amongst others, campaigns associated with defence force recruitment (\$34.7 million), the promotion of the new tax system (\$33.5 million) and publicizing a new apprenticeship scheme (\$10.8 million) and seniors initiatives (\$4.6 million) (see PM&C 2001). The MCGC is supported by an agency staffed by public servants and located within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), the Government Communications Unit (GCU). Following its re-election in 1998 the Howard Government transferred oversight and coordination of government communications and advertising from the Administrative Services portfolio to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the erstwhile Office of Government Information and Advertising was restructured and renamed the Government Communications Unit.¹¹ The GCU is now responsible for providing the government with strategic level advice on all aspects of communications and has the ‘special responsibility’ for ensuring the effective delivery of government information (MCGC 1995, p.5; ANAO 2002, s.58).

In part, the role of the GCU is to ensure that the Commonwealth gets value-for-money in purchasing information services. However the guidelines presently in place also ensure that the Government and the Prime Minister’s office have political oversight of publicity activities. These specify that departmental public affairs sections wishing to implement a publicity campaign need first secure permission from the responsible minister, and then, after discussion with the GCU in PM&C, be “brought before the MCGC for approval” (MCGC 1995, p.4). This political control evidently extends not only to the content of campaigns, but also to the commercial providers to be commissioned to carry them out, and there is now evidence to suggest that both the ALP and Liberals in government will contrive to ensure that contracts are allocated to their party pollsters and to the advertising professionals who will run their re-election campaigns (Peisley & Ward, 2001).

Richard Lucy (1993, 119) has observed that “there is no such thing as Cabinet” by which he means that the ruling political party (or coalition) of the day will differently arrange and conduct executive government to suit its own party purposes. It seems likely that the very same point applies to the exercise of party-political control of the

¹¹ Louise Dodson (1998, p.41) records that this overhaul of the OGIA had an expressly political motive. She says that, in the wake of its narrow 1998 election win, that the Howard Government made “high level” plans to achieve “more effective media management”.

arms of the PR state. Different parties and governments will differently arrange and oversee government public relations. In the case of the current Howard Government a few of these linkages are apparent. Howard's chief political adviser, Tony Nutt, presently sits on the MCGC and provides a direct connection between the Prime Minister's office and the oversight of government public affairs. The "baby animals" not only work closely with the Prime Minister's office, but also simultaneously report to the federal director of the Liberal Party (see *CPD Senate Estimates Committee*, 3 June 1998, p.311 and Dodson 1998a, p.3). And a careful study of circumstances surrounding Operation Relex will suggest that, well prior to the boarding of the Tampa and the subsequent "children overboard" episode, the Liberal party had determined to exploit illegal immigration and border control as a "wedge" issue for the 2001 national election (see Ward 2002). However there is still much to know about how the central party office is integrated within the PR state, and about the coordinating role it may play.

Conclusion

One recent estimate is that about 4000 journalists work for State or Commonwealth governments in a public relations capacity (see Chulov 2002, p.5). This holds little surprise since, as Terrill (2000, p.139) points out, although for much of the twentieth century Australian governments gave little thought to publicity, "information and communication have [now] become indispensable policy tools". This new reality demands that the study of political communication extend beyond the undeniable importance of the media and the use of PR and marketing strategies by political parties and sectional interest groups to 'spin' favourable news coverage. This is Deacon and Golding's (1994) very purpose in drawing attention to the emergence, and institutionalisation, of a PR state.

Beyond Terrill's (2000) exploration of the emergence of government information services and Tiffen's (1989, p.197) early exploration the methods of an "elaborate machinery of information disclosure by Government", there are few Australian studies that shed any light on the Australian PR state. Yet clearly in Australia, just as in the UK, the state plays a crucial role "as a dominant source of information and imagery" (Deacon & Golding 1994, p.4). Moreover the broad contours of the Australian PR state seem clear enough. At the national level, these include media advisers hired to assist ministers; those working in media units serving the overall government; and then the public affairs sections of public service departments whose activities are coordinated by instruments imposing a whole-of-government integration of information disclosure activities. Yet even although its broad features are apparent, we nonetheless know surprisingly little about the detailed operation of the PR state. As a consequence, there remains a sizeable gap in our understanding of political communication in Australia.

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