

The whistle we all heard: a re-conceptualisation of the 'dog-whistle' in politics and journalism

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Introduction

On November 24, 2007, eleven years of John Howard's leadership of Australia came to an end. In much of the subsequent media analysis of Howard's loss to Kevin Rudd, journalists suggested that the public were 'no longer listening' to Liberal party rhetoric (see Atkins 2007, p. 53; Beattie 2007, p. 55). Howard's previously successful communication about trust, terrorism and *Tampa*, with all their inaudible appeals to conservative politics, seemed to fall on deaf ears during the campaign. Much academic work has been published on Howard's penchant for this type of 'dog whistle' politics, especially his seemingly veiled Hanson-esque coupling of immigration, asylum seekers and terrorism in the children overboard scandal. While these quiet references may have been especially pertinent for a public still rattled by the events of September 11, 2001, seven years later, this fear of the Other, whether of Muslims or of a Labor-led economy, did not similarly translate into support for Howard. How such a seasoned political player, with so many resources for



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effective political communication, could fail to make himself heard is a question for further investigation.

This paper is concerned with the conception of 'dog whistles' in politics and journalism as an effective mode of appealing to an electorate. In light of Howard's election loss, understanding of dog whistle politics needs to take into consideration the complexities of politicised cultural discourses. The relegation of different cultural actors to simplistic modes of reception in regard to political messages, rather than having them viewed as active participants in negotiating and creating meaning, does not explain the often complex consequences of this mode of political communication. Furthermore, taking these complexities into account illustrates that the 'dog whistle' is a flawed political strategy; one with a fatal contradiction inherent in its mode of pitching a message only to a particular group of voters.

Defining the political dog whistle

The method of using a political 'dog whistle' has been defined by Australian journalist Mike Steketee as: one 'where a subliminal message, not literally apparent in the words used, is heard by sections of the community' (in Safire 2005). Most often this description refers to political communication presented by governments attempting to appeal to specific sections of their electorate without losing broad popularity. These political 'winks' often allow politicians to pander to policies or perspectives that would otherwise be considered conservative or discriminatory, without actually having to admit to that viewpoint. Dog whistling appears to be part of an electioneering strategy of implying similarity of opinion between the politician and sections of the electorate. These coded references, like inside jokes, are a strong signal that the politician is listening; that they are 'one of us' and others are not (Albertson 2004, 10). For example, John Howard's refusal to castigate Pauline Hanson, or his suggestion that he did not always agree with Fred Nile, though 'he speaks for



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the views of a lot of people' (in Riley 2002) is a quiet endorsement of those viewpoints, without the shrill conservatism that would be considered distasteful by the broader public.

The former Prime Minister John Howard's use of dog whistle politics has been much discussed in Australian politics, especially in communicating policies in regard to terrorism and immigration. The Howard government has often been accused of appealing to xenophobia and post-September 11 insecurity to contextualise their policies (see Poynting & Noble 2003). For example, Poynting and Noble have suggested that:

The Prime Minister's well-worn slogan, 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come', transmitted to a certain 'we' a signal that hid behind its literal content. (Poynting & Noble 2003, p. 42)

While the 'we' might literally refer to the assertion of the nation-state's best interests, Poynting and Noble suggest that the 'dog whistle' is inherent in his statement:

called to those who felt marginalised and disenfranchised by the local effects of globalised economic restructuring—those whose insecurity and ignorance left them prey to populist accusations that their 'relaxed and comfortable' past had been stolen away by cosmopolitan, politically correct élites and the multicultural industry. (2003, p. 42)

While this kind of dog whistling does not have to conclude with an election promise, those who identify themselves within that whistle might be assured of policy directives with their needs in mind. Thus the beauty of this form of communication is that a politician can appeal to different contingents of their electorate without having to support the perspective suggested by the dog whistles with any concrete policies.



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The dog whistle in journalism and politics

In theorising recent dog whistle politics, most academics have emphasised the similarity between government and popular media in perpetuating the myth of the threat of Muslims to the Australian way of life. In Australia, Manning has been a foremost contributor to theorising dog whistle journalism. Manning has used the 'sheep farmer's image' to illustrate how some reporting encourages governmental allusions to 'the Middle Eastern menace' (see Aly 2007). In the context of journalism, the politicisation of wording, photography and headlines contributes to this framing of reports about Muslims. Manning argues that this reportage:

is a portrait of a deep and sustained fear. It is also a portrait of an Australian orientalism that has been successfully transplanted and developed on Antipodean shores. (Manning 2004, p. 45)

Manning bases his theorisation of dog whistle journalism on Edward Said's work, *Orientalism*, first published in 1978. Said described Orientalism as:

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient. (Said 1995, p. 3)

Said was concerned to expose the way knowledge about Muslims and the Middle East had been constructed through certain cultural forms. In later texts like *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and *Covering Islam* (1981) he specifically analysed journalism as a source of prejudicial thinking about the Middle Eastern Other. Within this analysis, Said found that processes of Orientalism had constructed 'knowledge' of the Middle East:



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trafficking in 'expert' Middle East lore, supposedly well informed about Arabs. All roads lead to the bazaar; Arabs only understand force; brutality and violence are part of the Arab civilisation; Islam is an intolerant, segregationist, medieval, fanatic, cruel, anti-woman religion. (Said 1994, p. 357-358)

Following Said, Manning completed a two-year survey of Sydney newspapers where he argues that references to Arabs and Muslims have perpetuated these notions of Orientalism in Australia. He analysed reportage in four newspapers from 2000, finding that almost sixty per cent of the time, Muslims were associated with violence or terror (Manning 2004, p. 15). In one out of three articles about asylum seekers, they were associated with terrorism (p. 15). Manning concludes that government and media representations of asylum seekers were equally complicit in pre-election fear mongering: 'Media images were manipulated by the Government to make asylum seekers seem a threat, rather than a tragedy' (p. 1). The element of fear underlying these representations perpetuates an 'us' against 'them' mentality that Manning suggests has justified the government's military and legislative intervention against 'Islamic terror'.

Extending Manning's analysis, Scott Poynting's subsequent analysis of the representation of Lebanese people during the Cronulla riots found the same dog whistling. He argued that the riots were the culmination of populist incitement waged in the media and encouraged by the government. Despite the obvious racism emanating from the call, newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the 'rally' as 'a lesson in beach etiquette and good manners' and uncritically reprinted text messages conveying messages like: 'This Sunday every Aussie in the Shire get down to North Cronulla to help support Leb and wog bashing day' (in McMahon 2005). The subsequent refusal of Prime Minister John Howard to label the riots 'racist' seemed to mirror his exhortations during the *Tampa* affair of reclaiming Australia from the threat posed by 'outsiders'.



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For both Manning and Poynting, the media and the government appear equally involved in the representation of Muslims and Middle Eastern asylum seekers as a threat to the nation. The heady mix of post-September 11 insecurity, Middle Eastern asylum seekers and a new cultural focus on securitisation was seen to emanate from:

a powerful formula from populist columnists and opportunist politicians, equating terrorism, ethnic crime gangs, Islam, misogynist violent crime, Muslim ethnic-religious leaders, Middle Eastern asylum seekers and other folk-devils. (Poynting & Noble 2003, p. 47)

There is no doubt that the conception of 'dog whistling' effectively illustrates a governmental strategy of manipulating ideological claims within the field of 'culture' for political benefit. The proliferation of this new cultural knowledge through journalistic practice suggests that the media often practice an uncritical confirmation of a political status quo.

A cultural studies approach to dog whistle politics would agree that media and government are both critically implicated in influencing and producing meanings within particular historical and cultural contexts. This approach, however, would emphasise dog whistle politics as part of a mutable and heterogeneous interaction between two cultural actors fighting over the representation of meaning in the public sphere. As well as the successful dissemination of a particular political message, dog whistle politics should also encompass a sense of the complex interactions between media, government and audience and the consequences of these interactions on the production of cultural knowledge. Howard's inability to convey an effective political message during the 2007 election campaign suggests the evolutions that might occur in the production and dissemination of an effective dog whistle.



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During the 2007 campaign, popular media harangued John Howard's lack of a campaign 'message' and his inability to innovate his image as he projected it towards the threat posed by a new Labor leader. The sheer relentlessness of the poll numbers in Labor's favour suggested to most reporters that the country had made up its mind that it was time for a change, and that there was nothing the government could do about it. While newspapers once implied public agreement with the Howard Government perspective, they now suggested that:

There is a crankiness about the fact that the Government has lost its sense of what real life is about ... They're crowing week in, week out about how great economic managers they are, but that doesn't quite relate down to where people are feeling it. (in Christiansen 2007, p. 11)

Furthermore, Labor successfully and continually accused the Coalition of negativity, effectively disabling Howard's previous 'who do you trust?' campaign message. Howard previously gained popularity by framing each election as a referendum on popular issues such as economic management or national security. During the 2007 election, with climate change as a major issue, Howard's past dog whistles were unheeded. Instead Kevin Rudd's insistent framing of the election around the need for new leadership seemed to whistle a whole new tune to the electorate, and Howard could not modify or renew his message to combat it.

This change in reception of Howard's political message cannot be accounted for in traditional conceptions of dog whistle politics. This is because the conception of dog whistling does not consider the complicated ways that cultural actors both receive and construct meaning from the discourses forwarded by institutions such as government and media. Both media and government act according to various freedoms and constraints in attempting to represent dominant meaning in the public sphere. While the appearance of



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media contestation can sometimes disguise a deeper confirmation of the political status quo, governmental authority also acts within an imperative to secure itself as the protectorate of forms of national identity. Both cultural actors have a stake in the representation of meaning as a way to secure power, and governmental authorities are not exempt from this need. Governmental authorities are constrained by their need for public acceptance of their discourses: mobilisation of discursive strategy such as 'dog whistles' is often an attempt to shield their discourse from contestation by other cultural actors. Governmental authorities recognise the damaging potential that alternative representation of meaning has to the authority of their actions. If audiences begin to understand meaning in ways that differ from what is being suggested by government, or in ways that suggest their manipulation of power, scepticism or resistance may occur. As is suggested by Howard's election loss, this tension of governmental interests creates gaps in discourse where other representations can be presented as alternatives to dominant discourse.

The sense of complicity between media and government in conceptions of dog whistle politics belies the complexity of disseminating particular meaning to audiences. Conceptions of Orientalism as a mode of understanding dog whistle journalism have similarly been questioned for the 'singularity' of its representation. Orientalism has been criticised for making ahistorical, totalising assumptions about a vast, varied expanse of events pertaining to Orientalist discourse (see McCleod 2000, p. 48). Specifically, the structure of Orientalist discourse does not take into account the unique experiences of non-European or US countries in responding to and utilising Orientalist discourse. Even Manning suggests that there are ambiguities within his conception of dog whistle journalism that extend Orientalism's scope: 'Australia too, was a colonised space. It was an outpost of empire in one sense and subjugated to the empire in another' (Manning 2004, p. 45). He also goes some way towards suggesting that Orientalist representations are open to complex processes of negotiation in their reception by reporters: 'Australian journalism is not a transmission belt for European or US ideas' (p. 44).



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Perhaps what Manning is responding to is Said's seeming insistence on a uniformity of Orientalist discourse. Indeed, Said's methodology seems to insist on a kind of internal consistency of Orientalist thought and production. In Said's text, the reception of Orientalist forms of knowledge is always successful and thus the production of these representations is continually perpetuated. Said does not go far enough, failing to suggest, for instance, Orientalist discourse's ambivalence and heterogeneity beyond a fixed homogeneity. In this way, Said seemingly ignores resistances by the colonised, and from within the West itself, so that 'every European, in what he could say about the orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric' (McLeod 2000, p. 48). Interaction between the dissemination and reception of discourse is always varied, subjective and complex, but in Said's Orientalist analysis, it seems that no westerner can ever escape the apparent 'fact' of their own racism or discriminatory bias. Said's analysis thus duplicates the practices of Orientalism itself in its methodology, because it does not suggest the efforts that have been made in responding to, resisting or refuting Orientalist representations (Huggan 2005).

Similarly, conceptions of dog whistle politics tend to propel the analysis towards 'self cancelling procedures' in its historical and theoretical procedures. This is because it too easily assumes the successful dissemination and reception of a political dog whistle. Within this conception government, media and audience harmonise in producing and understanding the same representation of meaning. But if every dog whistle was successfully disseminated across a public who were unaware of the ideological undertones of a political message, but supported it nonetheless, where then are the possibilities for change that led to Howard's election defeat? The problem is that much analysis of dog whistle politics has not suggested that all members of the audience do actually discern the supposedly 'hidden messages' within political and journalistic discourse. In fact I would argue that governments spend a lot of money making their messages resolutely clear to everyone. These messages are not 'hidden' as such; they are just received or confirmed in different ways. As Goodin suggests:



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the fact that the practice is noticed, that it has acquired a name and bad press, suggests that the message is not literally inaudible to others beyond its intended target. They have noticed it. And by giving it a name, they have worked out a way (after a fashion) around it. (Goodin & Saward 2005, p. 471)

What is perhaps more important is to define dog whistle politics not in terms of the speaker, but of those who receive the information.

Whether or not a dog whistle is intended matters little if the 'intended audience' does not receive the message. If dog whistling appeals only to those who are already predisposed to think similarly to the values espoused by the implicit references, then what is the political damage? Dog whistling effectively gets on side with those who were already there. Analysis of religious references in American political communication suggests that this form of coded communication might be effective because it targets those already predisposed to respond favourably to the message, whilst keeping the overt political message sufficiently mainstream (see Albertson 2004). The distasteful aspect of dog whistling refers more to ideas of public information; how can we be suitably informed if politicians are strategically manipulating their communication? Coded language might be deceptive if those who do not 'get' the reference were deprived of information as to how a politician might position a policy. For example, when George W Bush referenced a court case about slavery in a presidential debate to suggest that the politically powerful have a responsibility to protect the weak, many pro-life campaigners suggested that Bush was implying his opposition to abortion by utilising their oft-quoted argument (Albertson 2004, p. 6). While a politician might suggest this was not a specific reference, it remains problematic. This form of dog whistling allows communication of important policy perspectives to be selective and strategic to the detriment of some voters.



But just how powerful dog whistle politics is as a mechanism of manipulatory politics is perhaps an open question. Can dog whistle politics actually work to weaken a politician's electoral hand? If a politician engaging in dog whistle politics is telling a group of voters one thing, while allowing another group to believe another, at some stage this contradiction will have consequences for the delivery of subsequent policy. The dog whistle that they are counting on to increase their share of votes also undercuts the authority that they might secure. This is because their subsequent policy is tainted by counter-productive appeals to different points of view (Goodin & Saward 2004, p. 476). As Goodin and Saward suggest (p. 474), governments use dog whistles to get into power through an ideological agreement to their mandate to rule. But when this rule is not backed up through policy, those who responded to the dog whistle feel cheated, and those who did not recognise the politician's ideology as self interest. An electoral victory built on a coalition of minorities, that involves different people voting for different things, means that there is no single policy mandate that the winner can credibly claim. The very need for dog-whistle politics—pitching a message to a particular group of voters that other voters do not hear—suggests the inherent contradiction of this technique for ensuring electoral success across the nation (see Goot 2004).

Beginning to reconceptualise dog-whistle politics

Perhaps the best method of addressing these issues is to suggest in a Foucauldian style that a multiplicity of perspectives and arguments is inherent in power relations amongst institutions, texts and 'the public'. This necessarily creates space for battles over language that develop when the discourses from a variety of public and private groups are engaged in the social discussion of historical moments and what these represent. Governmental authorities present discursive arguments alongside alternative discourses presented by other institutions, organisations and individuals. These representations (and their presented meanings) are always open to challenge through both physical modes of resistance, and the



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discursive battles over meaning that occur in language when certain groups present differing representations of events. To this end, the media also produce specific representations of insecurity that can work to either destabilise or confirm the political force of governmental efforts to impose 'fixed' meanings (Lewis 2005, p. 10).

Representation of 'meaning' therefore, is always subject to complex power relations between various institutions, organisations and individuals.

While certain groups within a culture may have more political, organisational or economic resources to present their discourses more immediately and forcefully, there are inevitably spaces where slippages of meaning, silences or organisational restraints allow for alternative representations to be presented. Though one particular representation may therefore seem dominant at one time, this is certainly not the last word; representations are constantly evolving as they become subject to mediating processes from other institutions. Therefore all discourses are contested, subjective, and reproduced according to the complex cultural interactions of cultural actors within certain historical and political contexts.

Conclusion

The concept of the dog whistle has been an important contribution to understanding the strategic use of communication for political gain. This has been especially pertinent in the post-September 11 era to elucidate the discriminatory representation of Muslims and asylum seekers by politicians and within popular media. But in 2007 Australian voters were seemingly immune to this politics of fear. This points to an important aspect of dog whistle politics that has not been mentioned in prior analysis; the possibility for the dog whistle to be heard and ignored. This paper has attempted to begin a new discussion of dog whistle politics, according to a cultural studies focus on the political possibilities for change in representation. The importance of this re-conception of dog whistle politics is that it allows



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an equal footing for cultural actors to contest dominant discourses. Media and audiences should not be seen as purely reflective of government; analysing dog whistle politics should instead explore their situation within particular politicised practices of meaning-making. Therefore conceptions of the dog whistle are implicated in a dynamic of maintenance and contestation of meanings within particular contexts and against other cultural actors. The importance of emphasising the evolution of meaning means that those who find themselves the subject of those discriminatory representations have a possibility of contesting them in the public sphere.

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