

# Mr Howard Goes To Washington - And Brings Home Victory

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In June 2002 – seven months after the most divisive federal election campaign since 1975 – Mr Howard went to Washington to be feted by the International Democratic Union – the worldwide association of centre-right political parties. So impressed were they by his against-the-odds victory that they elected him as their Chairman. In a White House function to celebrate the event, one of John Howard's travelling party, his chief strategist Lynton Crosby, was introduced to President George W. Bush as 'the Karl Rove of Australian politics'.

This was a revealing tribute. Karl Rove is renowned as the Republican Party's chief practitioner of 'wedge politics' – the art of using implicit racial signalling to divide the electorate and split centre-left parties from their blue-collar and tertiary-educated liberal bases. There can be little doubt that the 2001 Australian election was the purest example in modern political history of the art of the wedge.

I find little to disagree with in Judith Brett's assessment of the 2001 election. If her article is deficient it's in underestimating the level of pure political calculation behind John Howard's tainted victory and in thinking that the answer lies with reforming the Liberal Party. Nothing in politics or the history of nations is inevitable; it's the result of political choices we make. John Howard may or not be a racist at heart, but there is one thing for sure – he is the first significant post-war politician who has been prepared to exploit the politics of race to win at all costs. Others such as Andrew Peacock may have made a half-hearted effort, but Howard is the first to crack the secret code for success.

Howard had tried to use racial politics in 1988 when he called for a slow down in Asian immigration, but failed spectacularly through lack of subtlety. Why did he succeed in 2001? The answer is simple: he was able to dress racial politics up as something else – stopping insidious 'queue jump-

ers'. However, everyone knew what he really meant. The technique is still being used. Recently the Victorian Liberal Opposition Leader, Robert Doyle, pulled out of thin air the issue of the decline in standards of taxi drivers – they're slovenly, don't know Melbourne and don't speak English well. It wouldn't be lost on regular cab users that many Melbourne cab drivers are recent refugees and migrants, including a lot of Muslims. We hear you, Robert!

The arrival of the *Tampa* wasn't a lucky break for John Howard. Here's what really happened, based on reports that circulate in the corridors of power and the Canberra Press Gallery. In 2000, as Howard's poll ratings started to dive in

the wake of the GST, Liberal Party strategists started taking an interest in American-style wedge politics. They wanted to distract the electorate, especially blue-collar 'Hansonites' and small businesspeople, from the impact of the GST. In April 2000 John Howard allowed the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, John Herron, to stir up anti-Indigenous sentiment

by denying the existence of the 'stolen generation' (building on the anti-Indigenous messaging of the 1996 and 1998 elections). In the same month, he let Foreign Minister Alexander Downer pander to the far right by attacking the influence on the United Nations of flaky, unelected (black) African leaders (a strong One Nation theme). In August, the Prime Minister tried to appeal to social conservatives by introducing a bill to deny single women and lesbians the right to choose IVF treatment. This all happened against the at first faint, but increasingly noisy, drumbeat of the politics of immigration, when also in April 2000 inmates of detention centres started rioting.

The Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock started fanning the flames of resentment, warning that whole villages of asylum seekers were on the verge of arriving to spread TB. He started

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calling them 'queue jumpers' and accused them of demanding luxuries denied to other hard working Australians. Focus groups started revealing that this issue above all others excited interest from the otherwise sleepy electorate; more than interest – visceral anger. Even before the *Tampa*, the Liberal Party had started distributing leaflets in marginal electorates highlighting the Howard Government's strong stance on asylum seekers and detention centre inmates. Howard set up a unit within his Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to exploit the issue and prepare a political campaign around it. During 2001 Howard resembled one of those early nuclear physicists, slowly inching two hemispheres of radioactive U235 toward each other. When the *Tampa* arrived he finally got the chain reaction he was looking for. The rest is history.

Where to from here? Ultimately the Liberal Party is irrelevant to the ability of the nation to overcome this sorry episode. The silence of the 'wets' (especially their leader Peter Costello) in the face of lies and racism gives them no credibility. The electorate will eventually take out their anger on the Liberal Party. If Australia is to recover from the moral damage inflicted on the nation by the *Tampa* episode the leadership must come from the Left. It requires the swallowing of some hard truths.

During the Tampa election Labor was painted as simultaneously too soft on border protection and too hard on refugees. How did this collective act of 'doublethink' succeed?

One of the things highlighted by the 2001 election was the polarisation of the opinion-forming class in Australia (the politicians, journalists, opinion columnists, radio commenta-

tors and even letter writers to the newspapers). Almost without exception, those on the right denounced Labor as weak on border protection (even though the Howard Government eventually adopted Kim Beazley's compromise border protection legislation) and all of those on the left denounced Labor as pandering to racism (even though Kim Beazley sunk his own chances of winning the election by rejecting John Howard's initial *Border Protection Bill*).

This is not all the fault of the Labor Party; much blame lies with a broad Left that is out of touch with the sentiments of the great majority of the Australian people. The Australian Right, led by John Howard, has won the culture war, and the Left has to try to fight back. If it accepts that the Right will always hit it hard, the Left has to learn to defend itself by being tougher, more united and more realistic about the political options that confront its parliamentary wing – Labor.

If commentators on the Left thought Labor lost the election because it wasn't compassionate enough, they must have been reading different polls, listening to different radio stations and reading different newspapers to me. The Tampa election illustrates a wider problem for the Left. The Australian Left has walled itself within the inner city and lost touch with the opinions of its old constituency in the suburbs. Until it gets that contact back and becomes more politically realistic it will do no more than help reinforce the implicit message in John Howard's wedge politics and culture crusade – that the Labor Party is weak and stands for nothing. The real message from the success of John Howard's wedge politics is the need for the Australian Left to get real and win the culture war. ■

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# ~~Something to Chew On~~

*~~David Burchell~~*

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~~It's never easy to connect long term social and cultural changes to short term electoral ones. They're like two different time scales – one incremental, even geological in pace, the other immediate and seemingly will o' the wisp. Opinion polls are like weather reports, where the weather systems seem to scud around with arbitrary and unintelligible speed. Social changes are like the movements of river channels, where sand and silt washes and ebbs imperceptibly.~~

~~Yet Brett is surely right to link Howard's remarkable electoral ascendancy over the last eight years to the profound movements in Australian society and culture that have characterized the last two or three decades of our national life. To put the matter crudely, over this time frame 'progressivism' as a political force has become more and more the preserve of the articulate, well-educated and largely well-heeled, and less and less the natural habitat of those towards whom its solicitations are directed.~~