

# Oppositions have to change before they can win

Incumbent governments are flooding the media cycle, writes **Tony Barry**. Because of this, oppositions will need to abandon their small target strategies or they will never have a chance.



Liberal oppositions across the country are using an old game plan—where a ‘small target’ strategy could pave the way to government. Unless they figure out why this strategy is failing, these oppositions will remain in the political wilderness. Contemporary Australian politics has become an exercise in tactical media contact and tight news cycle management. Unfortunately this recent development has come at the expense of values based leadership and outward looking policies.

Incumbent governments have mastered the art of controlling the news cycle and starving the opposition of oxygen. This, coupled with paid media campaigns in the form of government advertising, effectively suffocates oppositions to the point where they get caught in the trap of trying to respond tactically through the media on a day to day basis in the hunt for elusive media coverage. But populist positions on the hot issues of the day may often not be consistent with a party’s core values. A party can only enhance its brand by building a long term values-based narrative with the electorate. By starving oppositions of oxygen, incumbent governments, particularly at a state level, have effectively reduced their opponents to irrelevancy. As a result, oppositions have scant opportunity, outside of a paid media campaign, to prosecute the case for change.

The notion of starving an opponent of oxygen is hardly a new tactic. At the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sought to deny Sinn Fein what she called ‘the oxygen

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of publicity’ by banning the appearance of their representatives on broadcast media. Although this effort failed (the BBC simply hired actors to read their lines) incumbent governments have transplanted this strategy to their own political environment.

Overseas, Tony Blair and Bill Clinton set the benchmark for tactical media contact and micro-management of the news cycle. The legacy of their contribution to politics is tightly scripted media stunts and celebrity endorsements which are now turning political races into beauty contests.

Closer to home in Australia, former state premiers Peter Beattie, Bob Carr and Steve Bracks have emulated their international counterparts. And now, at a federal level, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is clearly attempting to replicate this strategy.

As Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd rarely engages his opposition counterpart, instead choosing to float above the political fray in micro-managed media stunts that deprive his opponent of oxygen. On the few occasions when Prime Minister Rudd has engaged his opponent it has been in set media pieces such as the national apology to the stolen generation or the 2020 Summit. Indeed, the 2020 Summit is a monument to scripted set media pieces and management of the news cycle. As a media spectacle, the 2020 Summit reached new heights. But as a serious forum for policy development, the 2020 Summit, unsurprisingly, failed to match the hype.

The challenge for oppositions is to break free from this vortex created by starving oppositions of oxygen and effectively communicate a set of values to the electorate which builds a bridge between those established values and policies.

This is not a new, untried theory. Former United States President, Ronald Reagan had an uncanny ability to link stories or political narratives to personal values structures.

Reagan believed that political leadership was about being able to commu-

nicate a set of commonly shared values with the electorate. Reagan knew that once those shared values have been established, leaders must show they embrace those values in their own lives to help create an expectation in the electorate that those same values would manifest themselves in the leader’s policies or responses to emerging problems.

Reagan’s campaign strategist and pollster, Richard Wirthlin, was a pioneer in values based communication.

Underpinning values based communications is one simple principle—‘persuade through reason, motivate through emotion’.

According to Wirthlin, what made Ronald Reagan such a remarkable leader was his understanding that values are the strategic hinge for effective persuasion. Wirthlin has argued that values are:

the measures by which individuals determine the worth or importance of matters of concern in their lives. For example, ‘freedom’ is a value. If a person cherishes freedom, that value becomes the yardstick by which he or she can measure the importance of relevant public policies. A president might argue that a given military action is necessary to protect our ‘freedom’. The presence of that value communicates that the speaker treasures an insight that exists within the individual members of his or her audience.

Reagan and Wirthlin knew that the perceptions, expectations and beliefs that drive decision-making behavior have both rational and emotional components.

This complex set of rational and emotional perceptions are linked by a network of connections including a functional component. For every rational thought, there is a functional element and a terminal value. For instance, a strong national economy is a rational argument, and depending on the individual the functional dimension to that might be lower interest payments on

their house or low unemployment. The terminal value of that path, depending on the particular person, might be personal security, peace of mind or similar. In other words, depending on the individual, a rational argument might be that a strong national economy is important, the functional consequence of that might be lower interest repayments and therefore more disposable income and the terminal value of that might be that it gives that individual peace of mind.

In his halcyon days, former Prime Minister John Howard consistently demonstrated an established set of shared values with the electorate.

While the media were caught up in the technicalities and detail of John Howard's so-called 'pacific solution' and other like initiatives, the electorate were more interested in a shared value of protecting our borders. In other words, confident in their perception of John Howard's values, the electorate were given some comfort about how he might respond to other unique situations.

But the national political landscape has changed dramatically in recent times.

Robust policy and values debates have given way to micro-management of the media and staged public relations exercises. Tactical media contact and tight control of the news cycle by the incumbent government now dominate the new politik.

In the era of the new politik, values have taken a back seat and policy has been relegated as a tactical device to give the perception of differentiation between political opponents.

For instance, the much vaunted 'education revolution' in last year's federal election campaign was big on promise and hope, but short on detail. Six months into the Rudd Government, it is now clear that there was no 'education revolution' in a policy sense. It was simply an effective tactical device designed to sell a message about an opposition with plans for the future contrasted against a government perceived to be too focussed on its track record.

Similarly, Kevin Rudd's pre-election promise to sign the Kyoto Protocol was positioned as an off the shelf pan-

acea to address global climate change concerns. Few voters actually believed it was, but in their minds it was a potent symbol of Kevin Rudd having the new ideas and fresh thinking which he had promised—a key differentiator between him and his opponent John Howard. Again, this was an effective tactical device but not a substantive policy.

**T**his has significant consequences for opposition strategy. In the early 1990's the prevailing political wisdom for oppositions was 'don't be the issue'. By being a large target it invited the incumbent to attack the opposition and fuel doubts about their capacity to govern. But by keeping the focus on the incumbent government, voters were more likely to make their vote assessments based on performance considerations of the government.

Particularly in state politics the small target strategy no longer works as hard. In the early 1990's the prevailing political wisdom for oppositions was 'don't be the issue'. Today, the new strategic paradigm for oppositions is 'don't be irrelevant'.

In this new paradigm, rather than engage and attack the opposition, governments starve their opponents of oxygen thereby making them irrelevant. This inertia makes it more difficult for oppositions to build any momentum and gain relevance. Unable to gain relevance, oppositions struggle to demonstrate political competence which is a minimum requirement for the electorate in their vote assessments.

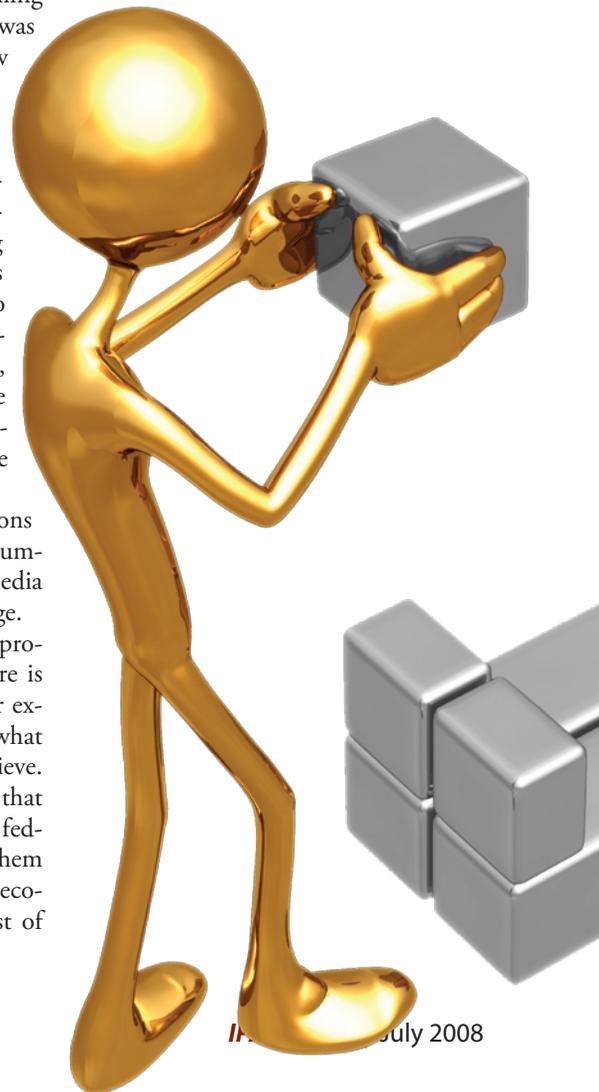
In this new paradigm, oppositions have no share of voice and the incumbent government, by owning the media cycle, has superior weight of message.

This new paradigm is more pronounced at a state level where there is less media scrutiny as well as lower expectations from the electorate of what state governments can actually achieve. Laurie Oakes has often observed that voters have higher expectations of federal governments because they see them as responsible for the key areas of economic management, including cost of

living, employment, interest rates and inflation, as well as major infrastructure, trade, defence and border protection. By comparison, voters now somewhat regard state governments as service providers where anything can be fixed by throwing more money at it.

The small target strategy also fails in the new paradigm because the incumbent government can run a totally positive campaign (particularly with the use of government advertising) that neutralises its own weaknesses, effectively slamming every door shut before the opposition is able to push it open.

The era of oppositions merely opposing the incumbent government's positions on issues is over, and is seen to be over. The iterative 'we're not Labor' or 'we're not Liberal'—which is a shapeless position—simply no longer works. Instead, the electorate is looking for political parties to provide some shape through values that can manifest themselves in broad based policies.



# Liberal politicians need to ask themselves how they would be different from Labor if the Liberals were in government tomorrow. If they cannot answer this question, then why are they in parliament?

The strategic imperative for oppositions is to avoid irrelevance by showing thought leadership, alternative and differentiated ideas and perceived competence to back that up. This requires engagement to get over the oxygen debt typically experienced by oppositions in non-election years while simultaneously avoiding soft voter perceptions that they are only engaging at the 'last minute'.

Getting over the oxygen debt by building a values based narrative also helps a leader establish political competency—a critical test for voters because it says something to them about a leader's ability to manage the economy, build more roads and deliver improved education and health services. In the minds of voters, if an aspiring leader isn't competent enough to get the basics of being a politician right, then they are probably not going to be competent enough to run the council, state or nation.

Instead of being caught in the strategic vortex of tactical media contact, a political party seeking electoral success must return to its core values that have underpinned its earlier successes.

For the Liberal Party to do so requires three elements. **First:** Liberal oppositions need to be more disciplined when it comes to media contact—quality is better than quantity. The temptation in opposition is to focus on tomorrow's headlines. Rather, oppositions need to develop a connected narrative around the values, ideas and policies they produce rather than simply engage in a staccato release of unrelated policy ideas, punctuated by shrill media led attacks on the government.

**Second:** the Liberal Party needs to return to its core values of enabling personal choice, family, enterprise, reward for effort and less government interference. Liberal politicians need to ask themselves how they would be different from Labor if the Liberals were in government tomorrow. If they cannot answer this question, why are they in parliament?

And **third:** the Liberal Party needs to reassess its personnel.

No credible discussion about the Liberal Party can avoid raising issues relating to personnel. For years some sections of the party have argued that the problem with the ALP was that it was too top-heavy with political professionals from the union movement. But with the Liberal Party on its knees federally and in every state and territory while the Labor Party enjoys unprecedented success, it is difficult to continue to defend that position. Just as some of the Liberal Party's

best performers have come up through the ranks after cutting their teeth in student politics, the union movement is an intense political training ground where young ambitious Labor hopefuls learn the fundamentals of politics and develop into hardened operatives.

Peter Costello frequently defends the political professional and advocates that though politicians may not be popular *en masse*, politics is a vocation—almost a calling—of its own.

There is a widely held view that in the future the most successful political parties will be those whose preselection processes will accommodate the logical balance between strong community representatives and political professionals who have an innate understanding of the need for values based politics. This is particularly so for parties in opposition. Until they recognise this necessary balance, oppositions will be unable to actively shape the long term identity, values and positioning of their party and leaders. There is a service industry secret that could easily be adopted by Liberal oppositions at the state level. Making no mistakes is good, but making a mistake or two for the right reasons on the road to improvement is better.

The electorate is well accustomed to governments and politicians making mistakes whether it is economic mismanagement or projects being built over-time and over-budget.

But they are far less forgiving of governments and politicians that they feel are not even trying. A successful opposition will need to take some risks to break free from the news cycle vortex.

Only then will they be able to establish a longer term narrative with the electorate that articulates a clear set of commonly shared values.

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## What next?