



CHRISTIAN KERR

As Ray Kroc was to flogging hamburgers, so Kevin Rudd is to politics

There is a ruthless efficiency about Kevin Rudd. The man who bewailed Brutopia's coming is as ruthless as his own caricatured 'neo-liberals' and market forces. Even more ironically, market metaphors best describe the Prime Minister's ruthlessness. It is made clear by an extremely well regulated—self-regulated—and efficient retail politics operation.

In the world of retail politics every utterance, whether a seemingly off the cuff remark or spontaneous emotional display, is calculated and targeted to a specific market. Kevin Rudd is a master. As Ray Kroc was to flogging hamburgers, so the PM is to politics.

Mark Latham couldn't help admire his retail politics skills when he said last month: 'They have jumped all over the financial crisis, not with a clear economic strategy in mind, but with an urgent sense of the political opportunity it presents.'

Latham may not have been much of a salesman, but he is a shrewd observer of politics. His analysis of what the Prime Minister is doing is absolutely right.

Rudd's *Monthly* essay on the global financial crisis sought to link the Liberals with causes of the chaos threatening the economy so he could portray himself as the saviour. The opinion polls suggest that by and large it has worked—for now. And like all success stories there has been an element of luck.

There are times when even the most successful sales operations go very badly wrong. Think 'New Coke', that moment of madness from the mid-eighties when Coca-Cola's marketers convinced the company it should change the formula for its drink.

Kevin Rudd had one of those moments over his financial stimulus plan when he suggested just 48 hours after the horror of the Victorian bushfires became clear that reconstruction aid could depend on its passage through parlia-

ment. No one would buy the suggestion. No one could. They were incredulous. The Prime Minister should have been pilloried. Instead he got lucky.

Kevin Rudd got away with an appalling threat of blackmail because his political opponents and most of the



commentariat found it so distasteful, so contemptible, they were unwilling to repeat it—until after a letter, not from the Prime Minister, but the Treasurer, 'clarified' matters.

And then the retail politics operations got back into full swing. The news emerged as all eyes were on the passage of the stimulus plan that the government had asked the House of Representatives Economics Committee to inquire into emissions trading.

The committee was asked if it would investigate if an emissions trading scheme is really the best way of tackling climate change and report back in the second half of this year. Not that it meant the government's ETS timetable will change, Wayne Swan's and Penny Wong's spinners said.

That, of course, was arrant nonsense. According to the draft timetable legislation will be introduced into parliament in May; will be passed in June and the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme will begin operating on July 1, 2010.

It all looked like fine-tuning of the retail operation, that Kevin Rudd knew he cannot portray his competitor Malcolm Turnbull as an economic zealot while he can be painted as a zealot on climate change.

Then the reference to the committee was suddenly withdrawn. Kevin Rudd realised not even he could sell this as a line. But he needs to look at the product, too.

We ignore the organic apples in the supermarket because they are more expensive. Something similar is happening with emissions trading too.

The public already believes the government has the moral—and policy—high ground on environmental issues, but Kevin Rudd is concerned they will not pay the price when the product goes to market.

The master of retail politics must consider his sales pitch. There are at least 24 test markets to try it in—24 electorates stretching from Queensland's north down to Bass Strait—with a coal vote. That is almost a sixth of the House of Representatives.

Many of these electorates are marginal, and coal industry sources point out that most which fall into this category have Coalition MPs. Peter Lindsay from the Townsville based seat of Herbert is on a 0.3 per cent margin. Jason Wood from Victoria's brown coal country has a majority of just 0.6 per cent. Bob Baldwin, from the Hunter seat of Paterson holds his seat by 1.6 per cent. And so it goes.

There is speculation of an early election, even though a double dissolution trigger does not yet exist and a half Senate poll could not be held until August next year.

But that ruthless retail politician Kevin Rudd is considering his options—and his opportunities to squeeze the other brand out and dominate the market.

R