Tacticians, talent, transmitters and targets: The power of pictures in the Howard Prime Ministership

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Tacticians, talent, transmitters and targets

THE POWER OF PICTURES IN THE HOWARD PRIME MINISTERSHIP

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This thesis is submitted as part of the requirements for the award of Bachelor of Communications (Honours) in Media and Cultural Studies

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

After a decade as Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard has attained a substantial place in the nation's political history. His success can be measured in numerous ways: four successive victories for his Liberal-National Party Coalition in general elections since 1996, five opponents in turn at the head of the rival Australian Labor Party and consistently high approval ratings in opinion polls for his performance as prime minister. He has also dominated the political discourse of Australia. His views and policy positions have become progressively entrenched. This is especially true in the areas of international affairs, military engagement and patriotic causes. John Howard's philosophy and ideas provide the substantial fuel for his dominance but two other factors have produced high-octane achievement: his Government's reaction to the tide of world events and a political acumen demonstrated in effectively communicating to the electorate at large.

The Howard Government's ability to harness the power of mass media images (derived from 'set piece' photographs and associated TV footage of the PM) is the focus of this research. Drawing upon evidence from the fields of public relations, journalism, photography and political practice, this dissertation explains the immense contribution of visual communications to the Prime Minister's success.

The research has been able to demonstrate that Prime Minister Howard's visual portrayal is thoroughly constructed by the political PR machine supporting his party and Government. It also highlights how the role of pictures in sending political messages is consistent with contemporary political communications practice. At the same time, picture management of such style and scale exploits the modus operandi of journalists based in Canberra and has proved to be a powerful contributing factor in Howard's enduring electoral dominance and polling status as preferred head of government.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:
(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
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Richard Goodwin
31 October 2006
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INTRODUCTION

In the pages of Australian political chronicles, John Howard has earned a formidable and impressive reputation, even while he remains in power and seemingly ascendant. His is both an unlikely story - in terms of its long and often less than overwhelming gestation - and a brilliant story - in terms of its unashamed exploitation of the times. Howard the humbled, weighed down by a shortfall of success in the first two decades of his long parliamentary career, ended up as Howard the hero, a cunning and disciplined leader who mastered an explosion in the mass media's appetite and reach to bask in a new image and stunning electoral victories.

The story of Howard's ultimate success in office constitutes a compelling chapter in Australian politics. It speaks volumes for tenacity, for learning from others, for the skills needed to elevate the plain to the status of the preferred and for the power of the camera lens to create and sustain political communications.

Background

Although Howard was deputy leader and had held the senior post of Treasurer in the Fraser Government defeated in 1983, his party overlooked him in favour of Andrew Peacock to replace Fraser who resigned from Parliament. He did eventually become Opposition Leader but then lost the 1987 election and was subsequently dumped by his party in 1989. "In the mid-1980s, you couldn't give him away," says Morris (2006). The Liberals re-instated Peacock who lost in 1990 at the polls. They then turned to John Hewson, but failed to win the 1993 election and in 1994 Hewson's leadership imploded. According to Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006), despite the fact that Howard and some supporters lobbied furiously in the party room, Howard gained few votes "because people thought he was unelectable. He'd been to the people and been beaten in the polls."
The party instead experimented disastrously with youth, installing Alexander Downer in the top job. As Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006) explains, “when Downer imploded, out of sheer desperation, they returned to Howard”. The Liberal Party’s polling, according to Morris (2006), indicated that voters “thought of Howard as ‘Uncle John’ and liked his values”. At the 1996 poll, Morris (ibid) points out, “Australians decided they preferred him to what they saw as an arrogant, out-of-touch Paul Keating”. In the decade that followed, as his stature grew, he went on to win another three general elections, delivering in an abundance no-one imagined possible.

**Objectives**

The objectives of this research project were to demonstrate whether Prime Minister Howard’s visual portrayal is:

- carefully engineered by the political PR machine supporting his party and Government,
- aided by the Australian media’s national reporting structures and modus operandi,
- consistent with contemporary political communications practice, and
- a powerful contributing factor in his enduring electoral dominance and polling status as preferred head of government.

**Structure**

This dissertation comprises four main chapters which are structured around the pillars of the hypothesis I set out to examine:

- **Tacticians**: The work of the public relations tacticians and the strategies they pursue. This chapter discusses the principles and practices of contemporary political public relations within the
framework of the Howard Government’s years in office as well as the application of semiotics;

- **Talent**: An analysis of the Prime Minister himself as the key ‘talent’ to be marketed by his party and government. It also discusses the evolution of his image;

- **Transmitters**: A chapter on what I have called the prime transmitters of political information in Australia – the Parliamentary Press Gallery domiciled in Canberra – and its operational imperatives. Particular attention is given to the media’s access to the Prime Minister and its outcomes;

- **Targets**: A final chapter exploring how the targets of political messages, the Australian electorate at large, have been able to relate to, access and respond to the Howard prime ministership and the public image it has projected.

**Methodology**

A review of literature at the commencement of the study provided a breadth of understanding of the elements that combine to deliver Howard’s supremacy. From this examination it was possible to identify a theoretical basis for the skilful application of public relations insights and practices by the Government and the Liberal Party. These have helped to characterise the nature and strength of Howard’s national leadership. It was also possible to apply the study of semiotics to the way Howard is projected pictorially as a political figure. Literature pertaining to the culture and mechanics of contemporary political reporting, especially in the visually-powerful media of press and television, with its concentration in Canberra, was also researched.
Scrutiny of the literature continued over the full period of the research, revealing a range of inter-related threads pertinent to and generally supporting the central hypothesis that prime ministerial photo opportunities are carefully constructed and, as a result, laden with signs that are imbued with political messages.

I set out to examine the strategic construction of the PM's photos and the semiotics of their contents. Many of these I tested with participants in the process.

Comprehensive face-to-face interviews were conducted in Canberra with players representing three key sections of the political-media-public relations spectrum: a senior television journalist, head of a network bureau; a veteran press reporter, servicing the entire News Ltd chain; and the man credited with setting the direction for much of the Prime Minister's communications strategies, his inaugural chief-of-staff. The subjects of the lengthy interviews were:

- **Paul Bongiorno**, a former print journalist with the *Courier Mail* newspaper in Brisbane, is Network Ten's Parliament House Bureau Chief and Political Editor. Bongiorno is the current Vice-President of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery. He has also hosted the weekly political interview program *Meet The Press* since March 1996.

- **Glenn Milne**, a former chief political correspondent for the Seven Network, is now senior Canberra correspondent for the *Sunday Telegraph* and a range of other Sunday papers in the News Limited stable. He also writes a weekly column for *The Australian*.

- **Grahame Morris**, a one-time journalist from country NSW, was Prime Minister Howard's first chief-of-staff in 1996. In this role he served as a key advisor on communications strategy. He later worked as the principal of a major public relations and lobbying
company, Jackson Wells Morris, and is now Chairman of the Office of Federal Government Services, Pricewaterhouse Coopers. He remains a close friend of Howard.

In order to try to achieve a spread of backgrounds, gender and age among respondents, I canvassed more than 20 prospective interview subjects for this project, including six women prominent in the political media, but none of the latter was able to be engaged.

Throughout the thesis I have sought to present an analysis of the semiotics of photographs that are recognisable products of the political apparatus devoted to projecting the Howard imagery.

In my research and writing, I have been able to draw upon my own extensive experience and expertise in the fields of journalism and public relations, in which I have worked for 35 years. In the dissertation I have applied my own knowledge derived from the principles and practices of these professions and from a 40-year informal study of Australian politics.

**Limitations**

The literature from the various fields pertaining to this topic suggested there was considerable scope to examine the phenomenon of photographic opportunities among political leaders in general, given that the use of highly-constructed picture facilities (abbreviated, in the jargon of the media, as pic facs) appears to be widespread both in Australia and globally. Indeed some of the interview respondents traced the origins of this work to previous Australian politicians. The deployment of these communications tactics by leaders such as President George W. Bush in the US and Prime Minister Tony Blair in Britain offered fertile ground for examination but I decided to omit such a study simply due to the limited size of this thesis.
I also decided to restrict the chosen examples of Prime Minister Howard’s visual depiction to still photographs sourced from the public record—press pictures and, in a few instances, pictures from the Prime Minister’s own web site. There are several reasons for this:

1. The relative ease of reproducing the photographs in this dissertation;
2. The fact that most if not all the images were paralleled in television footage because, by the nature of the picture opportunities, TV cameras invariably had the same or similar access to the talent; and
3. The power of photographs to make a significant impact on the minds of readers.

This final argument finds testimony in Ricketson’s observation (2006): “Where words are black marks on a page that must be processed intellectually before they have any meaning, pictures prompt a more visceral response, and unlike television, they don’t go away.”
CHAPTER 1

TACTICIANS

Applied to politics, the essential purpose of public relations is to promote and protect the image, ideas and views of political players. The Federal Government employs a vast number of public relations practitioners (Grattan, 1998, p. 35) who are euphemistically called media advisers and operate effectively as gatekeepers. The trend has prompted some political scientists to consider Australia to be a PR state (Ward & Stewart, 2006, p. 199). Young (2004, p. 77) cites estimates that there are now 4,000 journalists working in public relations for state and federal governments. This chapter delves into one major facet of public relations in politics, focusing on the careful and strategic management of the leader’s photo opportunities or pic facs (picture facilities) by Prime Minister Howard and his circle of advisers. According to the key participants interviewed in the course of this research, the office has been able to consistently engineer powerful visual images that shape perceptions of the PM’s capacity and performance. Throughout this dissertation there are examples presented of pictures sourced from media outlets. Others come from a prime ministerial web site which maintains a section called photo gallery.

The approach of the media advisers in the leader’s inner sanctum is soundly underpinned by a body of experience and research that establishes the virtues of paying acute attention to the way pictures convey meaning and influence opinions. Morris describes the media minders as good operators, confirming that they stage-manage the pic facs (interview with author, 2006). Craig (2004, p. 116) asserts that “contemporary politics is substantially centred around the production of media images and public judgements about those images.” Petley (2000, p. 47) identifies the everyday influence of media in conveying knowledge to the masses from which attitudes are formed. In analysing how voters form their views, Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006) says “the intersection of issues
and politics is obviously the mass media”. According to O’Neill (1993, p. 119), public relations practitioners working in politics have a capacity “to create news events to order”, manipulating the detail of politicians’ media appearances down to “every visual prop”. He concludes: “Control the pictures and you control the story.” Former Chief of Staff and long-time political strategist to John Howard, Grahame Morris (interview with author, 2006), puts it simply: “Image is everything.” Hence the best PR can end up looking like news (Stauber and Rampton, 2004, p. 14), an outcome Bongiorno says is easy to achieve for the government of the day (interview with author, 2006). This result is the product of the highly professional selling of political messages through maximum management and manipulation of the media (Grattan, 1998, p. 34).

Public relations practitioners have perfected the methods and motives for manipulating the content of visual images in order to impart particular messages and meaning. Kelly (1995, p. 199) refers to the staging of events to maximise visual appeal: “Image merchants put the correct ‘spin’ on [politicians’] performances” (p.263). Kelly cites the view of a British pollster, Robert Worcester, that the things people see stick in their minds. The political insiders interviewed for this research conclude that the response of people looking at a press picture or TV image can be managed through careful attention to what elements are included in pic facs. “This is true,” says Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006), “therefore a lot of care is often given to where picture opportunities will be.”

According to Morris (interview with author, 2006), Prime Minister Howard uses appropriate backgrounds for his pic facs.:

The PM’s office has an advance party whose brief is to consider locations and backdrops for use when the leader is to speak. This is done to try to control the image. You want as few distractions as possible to the message itself.

Each interview subject cites examples of objects included in Howard’s regular photo opportunities and explains their significance in
communicating meaning to the reader or viewer. These are discussed throughout this dissertation.

An important conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the power of visual images to deliver political success does not need to be proved in some empirical fashion. A widely-held perception that such power exists is sufficient for it to be pursued by those shaping political communications. As Morris (interview with author, 2006) observes, Prime Ministers used to have a single press secretary but now there are whole PR machines deployed. That effort would not happen if it did not yield results.

Consider how this phenomenon works.

Among the key tasks of the PR operatives is determining and ‘cleansing’ the locations and settings for TV shots and press pictures. For instance, distracting backgrounds are to be avoided. An example of such a background is a crowd in which there is any hint of chaos or discord. Other examples are discussed further on. Morris (interview with author, 2006) observes: “Much effort goes into eliminating any elements that could prove distractions.” He adds:

There was a time when camera operators and photographers could go behind the leader, say at an election policy launch, to take shots over the speaker’s shoulder so the leader’s back was depicted with the audience in view. This can be quite disruptive and a major distraction. Today the preferred setting requires natural breaks behind the leaders to prevent any pictures that prevent the message getting full attention. There are now small armies deployed doing this work.

Howard’s people “have become masters of set dressing” (Bongiorno, interview with author, 2006).

One of the most illuminating and sustained examples of the construction of visual settings is the strategic use of the area of Parliament House known as the Prime Minister’s courtyard. This has become the preferred location for
the PM's press conferences, a practice that started with Paul Keating and has been vigorously enhanced by Howard.

Figure 1

PM courtyard: Press conference location designed to send the most favourable signs.
(Source: Prime Minister's website - www.pm.gov.au/news/photo_galley/img_leaders/0210309Di-03.jpg)

As figure 1 shows, the leader is flanked by flags at a rostrum with what is called a splitter box so there is not a sea of microphones around him (Bongiorno, interview with author, 2006). The PM walks out of his office and stands at the podium. He looks important, presidential and in charge. Importantly, the door is right behind him:

He can terminate the press conference, turn on his heel and walk away – and it never looks bad. If you do it down in the blue room in Parliament House, he's up on a podium and if he's under pressure there is a 10-second pan with the TV cameras as he dodges the questions. So those are considerations as well. Whereas going back through the [courtyard] door, you're going back into your office, just resuming work. You can't get a picture of him running away down in that courtyard or being bombarded with questions as he leaves. A leader's awkward exit when they're panic-stricken or under pressure can easily become the story. (Milne, interview with author, 2006)
All these factors are thoroughly thought through. The tacticians in the PM’s office utterly control his pic facs (Bongiorno, interview with author, 2006) and in so doing anticipate anything that might put at risk the key messages espoused by a head of government who always wants to be seen as being on top of his job and advancing the national interest.

There is a strong basis for connecting an understanding of the strength of visual impressions with consideration of how photographs and TV images can be constructed. The field of semiotics is instructive in this respect. In a sample of the literature on this topic, Rayner, Wall and Kruger (2004, p. 15) describe Roland Barthes’ concept of connotation and the interaction that occurs when a sign – which for the purpose of this thesis would be the characterisation of a photograph of the Prime Minister in action - meets the feelings or emotions of the user and the values of their culture. Because we are inundated with images today, we instinctively draw conclusions from what we see in them.

Fiske (1982, p. 91) throws further light on the work of Barthes and his theory of two orders of signification. This semiotic theory explains that a sign denotes an external reality (signifier) and an interpretation (signified). As Stevenson (1995, p. 41) explains, Barthes first level of signification, called denotation, “refers to the commonsense level of meaning”. The second level, labelled connotation, “means the implied wider meanings that are dependent on certain cultural associations”. As a result of different cultural codes, then, connotations add meanings to the denoted subject. Attention will be drawn to these connotations in many of the selected prime ministerial pictures throughout this dissertation.

Stevenson (1995) also discusses the work of Hall whom he says “makes a basic distinction between encoders and decoders”. He adds:

The encoding of the media text is dependent upon certain professional norms and procedures, institutional relations and technical equipment. Once the message has been symbolically
encoded, it is open to the reading strategies employed by the audience. The reception of the audience is dependent upon cultural and political dispositions, their relationship to wider frameworks of power and access to mass-produced technology. (p.42.)

To determine the extent to which public relations strategists in the political arena are conscious adherents to encoding is beyond the scope of this research but it is evident from the conceptual origin of most of the PM’s photographs featured herein that their embedded meanings are neither accidental nor incidental.

The media advisers in offices such as the Prime Minister’s exploit what Geraghty (cited in Curran and Gurevitch, 2005) calls “the process of recognition and understanding”. She explains:

> We relate what we see in a photograph, the visual signs, to a wider set of understandings. Some of these may be signified directly from what is in the photograph; others depend on cultural knowledge which can be activated by the photograph. (p. 48)

The quest to shape political perceptions derives from the extent to which leaders such as Howard and their tacticians can influence both the denotation and connotation. Put simply, the literature supports a conclusion that in the field of political communications, viewer responses can be managed to some degree through careful attention to what elements are included in picture opportunities. However this management does not guarantee uniform responses because visual images, as Barthes recognises (cited in de Zepetnek, p. 1), are polysemic, “that is, open to a range of possible meanings”. This range can be reduced by the use of ‘anchorage’, Barthes’ word for text accompanying an image, such as a caption. Using figure 1 as an example, some readers will merely see the PM in the company of the assembled defence heads; others will see the picture as a statement of authority, conveying an almost a ‘commander-in-chief’ message.
O'Shaugnessy (1999, p. 67) spells out how objects, clothes, colours, camera angles, body language and so on all convey connotations. He adds: "Another way of describing this mode of analysis is symbolism . . . [which] tends to suggest something consciously intended by the image maker." The symbolism of figure 1 centres on the head of government in total control, 'ruling' over the country and the military. Public relations practitioners readily know how to exploit symbolism. An example would be when a politician dons a hard hat to tour a construction site, the hat becomes a symbol or sign meaning the political figure is 'on the job, working diligently'. Also the politician is aligning 'himself' with the 'workers', saying he's 'one of us'. Further more, he is proving he follows the rules of the workplace. In the next chapter, several examples of this approach involving John Howard are discussed.

Selby and Cowdery (1995, pp. 41-42) look at how to 'read' media texts, based on the simple fact that these texts are structured and organised in certain ways. Again one such form of analysis is based on semiotics, which extracts meaning from the "use of visual codes and conventions". The authors readily apply semiotic theory to the analysis of television and the use of symbolic props therein. Their impact or interpretation varies within the viewing audience. Ang (1996, p. 42) sees audiences as "active" in that they negotiate multiple meanings within texts, "articulated within and by a complex set of social, political, economic and cultural forces".

My research shows what this application reveals in the case of a range of Prime Minister Howard's 'set piece' television appearances and parallel press coverage in that it is possible to identify a string of props apparently designed to support and amplify the PM's 'messages du jour'. Using figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 (below), it is instructive to identify some of the visual codes embedded or implied in the shots of Howard.
Milne (interview with author, 2006) refers to visual codes as ‘buttons’ designed to elicit certain responses from those judging the images. Although his government later tried to sell off the Snowy Mountains Corporation, at the time the Prime Minister was photographed with workers from the hydro-electric scheme (figure 2) readers of this picture would have formed a view of how appropriate it was for the PM to visit these representatives of an ‘heroic’ engineering marvel. It stands as an example of what Milne (interview with author, 2006) means when he says an “image can over-ride the actual message . . . if they [the pictures] are strong enough, they will dictate how people will respond to the story”. Note also the Akubra hats worn by the PM, Mrs Howard and the Member for Eden-Monaro, Gary Nairn, behind them. Bongiorno reflects:

There is certain status, dignity and gravitas to being leader of a country. If you’re the Prime Minister and you go to an informal setting . . . then surely you can wear your Akubra and your boots and have an open-neck shirt and perhaps be a little more accessible to the people who are allowed to be nearby. (Interview with author, 2006)
Although there was a crowd on the lawns of the White House when this picture (figure 3) was taken, the waving by leaders is often done to provide movement and animation for the camera crews taking their shots from a safe distance away (Bongiorno, interview with author, 2006). It might best be summarised as the "theatrical aspect of the political sphere" (Minson in Burchell and Leigh, 2002, p. 135). On a previous visit to Washington, when Bush and Howard emerged from church, the President gave Howard a nudge to wave at the cameras. (D'Hage, 2005).

John Howard will often use a flag behind him, as depicted in figure 4. Morris (interview with author, 2006) says this is "a simple device which conveys the impression of authority and of nationalism". While these traits will be further examined in the next chapter, the visual impacts can be explained thus:
It is very John Howard. It looks statesman-like. The alternative to such an approach is dull and flat, not sending any message or it can be distracting. There are other devices you would see in prime ministerial pictures. Say if you were shooting in his office, you’d probably see a family picture on display or a photograph of Mrs Thatcher. They all tell a message about him. (Morris, interview with author, 2006)

There is nothing accidental about the core elements of this picture (figure 5). The PM and his image makers fully understand the importance of symbolism and symbolic props and use them to their advantage (Milne, interview with author, 2006). Nowhere is this more evident than in prime ministerial statements on foreign affairs or on trips abroad.

You look at Howard at the White House recently with all that pomp and ceremony. You just can’t go around that even though you know it’s just been put on to send the message that we’re standing side by side with America and all the rest of it. (Milne, interview with author, 2006)

When the PM travels, an advance team from his office helps to plan the trips. According to Morris (interview with author, 2006), “all locations and opportunities are thought through in advance”, adding that there is far greater control exercised now than there was at the start of Howard’s term of office. In the early days, a number of things did not work out – “such as a day at the cricket at Lords when it rained and the PM was left looking like he didn’t have enough do to” (interview with author, 2006) but lessons were learned for future planning. Morris elaborates:
The work of the advance team in the Prime Minister's Office ensures that they book the space in the places where the leader can do something for the media. They take into account matters like what would journalists want [in the picture] to depict the PM [in the location]. On the other hand, the media team is focused much more on content, making sure the PM is briefed properly (Interview with author, 2006).

Milne reflects (interview with author, 2006) that when the PM travels, “controlling the environment” is the means of maximising the impact of symbolism. His minders pick the venues “but they are acutely aware, I think, of what he will do and won't do and of what is appropriate to his style”. Devices readily employed include presidential-style podiums, flags, microphones that function properly and the cordonning of working media at a distance.

It's orderly, even down to seating the media. I know that's a natural courtesy but what they don't like is the impressions of uncontrolled situations where microphones are stuffed up his nose or it's outside and reporters are up close and they're yelling questions. This is particularly in the case of the Prime Minister. Other ministers don't have that luxury. (Milne, interview with author, 2006)

The flag, “a projection of patriotism and national identity”, is fundamental (Milne, interview with author, 2006) such that it adorns every press conference and even has its own special container for transporting on prime ministerial travels abroad.

Selling the message of the government of the day and its leader is not new. As Barnes (2005, p. 22 and 24) notes, the Whitlam and Fraser Governments took steps to promote their profiles. While he calls Whitlam's “somewhat chaotic public relations efforts”, Barnes says Fraser was “actually aware of the ongoing importance of communicating the government's messages in a co-ordinated an controlled fashion to a media that had burgeoned since the Coalition was last in office in 1972”. Today the public relations drive out of the national government is wall-to-wall. “We live in an age of government by PR”, according to Orr and Tham
(2005). Every Minister has at least one public relations practitioner, every government department has at least one and every public agency has at least one. Most have many more than one. The cost runs into millions. Furthermore, as Young (2004, p. 78) notes, “the commercial PR industry backs up the publicly funded PR state”. Projecting the image of a “popular celebrity politician”, argues Louw (2005, p. 175), represents the ultimate success for spin doctors.

In modern politics, public relations practice is powerful, deeply entrenched and essential to establishing advantage, especially when there is a lens in use. For the past decade in Canberra, many of those lenses have focused on the figure of John Howard whose journey as a political communicator is examined in detail in the second chapter.
CHAPTER 2

TALENT

John Howard initially represented an enormous challenge for the public relations practitioners. So too for the working media, used to the charismatic and colourful leadership of the Hawke-Keating era.

The Howard image, the central focus of this chapter, was previously more that of a dogged, honest survivor than a convincing electoral asset. “Howard didn’t look all that exciting but he had one thing going for him,” observes Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006), “and that was longevity and therefore credibility.” When his party won the 1996 election, Howard’s evolution as a political figure was just beginning. In summary, Howard progressed from being “comprehensively whacked at the polls, reduced to a figure of ridicule” in the 1980s (Price, 2005) to a high point where “today Howard seems invincible” (Brett cited in Henderson, 2005, p. 17), “on the verge of being as powerful and influential as his hero, Robert Menzies”.

(The Australian editorial, 2006)

Howard’s progression can be traced in part to his enunciation of key political convictions and policy decisions. Among the most striking have been his association with the armed forces, the fight against terrorism, the need to quell rebellious behaviour in fledgling neighbouring countries and various other aspects of the defence of the nation. The development of Howard’s public image has relied heavily on his engagement on the international stage, beginning with East Timor in 1998 and revisited in 2006.

This association with the armed forces has tapped into Howard’s ancestral connections (which are amplified later in this chapter) and has been exploited through numerous high-profile picture opportunities. Examples of such pictures abound, evidenced on web sites maintained by the Prime
Minister’s Office and major newspapers (Photo Gallery and Fairfax), several of which feature in figures 6, 7 and 8 (below). As Sheridan (2005) notes, “the public love the military more than ever and they associate the military with Howard”.

![Image]

**Figure 6**

*Sea of khaki: Prime Minister Howard thanks Australian troops in Dili for their peacekeeping work.*

*(Photo: Brendan Esposito, The Age 19 July 2006)*

![Image]

**Figure 7**

*Fare thee well: Prime Minister presides in Townsville in 2001 as soldiers depart on a dangerous overseas mission.*

Among the more notable and well-executed of the Prime Minister's photo ops have been his frequent appearances with members or returned members of the armed services. If there are troops to be farewelled or sailors to be welcomed home, the presence of the PM has been a familiar feature of such occasions in recent years. Morris (interview with author, 2006) has no doubt that pictures have been influential in developing the public association of Howard with the forces. But he sees nothing contrived in this effect, saying that although Howard had a natural understanding of military matters, the decisions he had to take as Prime Minister were, nevertheless, difficult.

The emergence of John Howard as a defender of the Australian national interest, chronicled by Brett (2003), Sheridan (2005) and Kelly (2005) among others, is a guide to the thinking behind the use of symbols in the communications tactics deployed to project a favourable public image for Howard. Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006) sees "the greatest symbolism... when the Prime Minister turns up waving to the troops as he despatched them overseas to Iraq or wherever". Similarly, using an example of the PM abroad (such as figure 9 below), he notes:
The image of Howard visiting the troops in Iraq wearing a flak jacket and helmet would feed into somebody who commits the troops to a dangerous assignment and lends them moral support and is a courageous leader. Basically as Prime Minister he has the capacity to use the whole Defence force as a prop and he does so often and probably to great effect. (Bongiorno, interview with author, 2006)

![Figure 9](PM in line of fire and lenses: Howard visiting troops in Baghdad)

(Source: Andrew Taylor – Reuters/Corbis, 25 July 2005, From Encyclopaedia Britannica online at cache.eb.com/eb/image?id=84990)

Milne (interview with author, 2006) corroborates: “Around here he is known as the Prime Minister for Defence.” Consistent with Howard’s comprehensive public relations strategies, such an image has a foundation in authenticity because “his links and affection for the army and military matters goes back to his own family history” (Morris, interview with author, 2006). Brett (2003) explains:

Both his father and his grandfather fought in World War I and, as Prime Minister, Howard has been able to visit the sites of their wartime experiences. In many speeches he has embraced the national myth of Gallipoli ‘where our nation’s spirit was born’. (p. 204)

Another thread of consistency is the fact that one of Howard’s first decisions when coming to power was to quarantine the Defence Forces
from budget cuts. As Milne sees it (interview with author, 2006): “It turned out to be a very prescient decision in the end. So he can claim rightly that he does deserve to be identified with the defence forces.”

Brett (2003, pp. 203-204) outlines the way in which John Howard as Prime Minister claimed the imagery of the ‘Australian legend’, a concept enunciated by historian Russel Ward in the 1950s. Ward’s notion centred on the workers’ experience, loyalty to mates and generosity, inter alia. Howard came to re-define these virtues as “more broadly popular forms of the Australian legend”. Brett cites as an example Howard’s praise for the surgeon hero of Changi, Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop, for his laconicism and mateship, his commitment to his country and selfless service to his men. She records that, like many Australian men, Howard is fascinated by the lessons of war, both for individuals and nations, and adds (p.204): “Howard’s speeches are filled with characterisation of what he variously calls the ‘Australian way’, ‘Australian values’, the ‘Australian identity’ and the ‘Australian character’.”

Brett’s analysis is supported by Garran (2004, pp. 7-8) when referring to a device which Howard applies to help shape his new image: “creating a new story about Australia’s identity”. Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006) detects the same trend, a strengthening of the prime ministerial image by garnering patriotism: “Howard is a cultural warrior. He believes he has been given an opportunity to put an imprint, his philosophical imprint, on Australia.”

Further elucidation of these themes comes from Kelly (2005, p. 30) discussing the 60th commemoration of the end of World War II when Howard, “invoked the patriotism that has gathered momentum under his leadership”. Kelly writes:

His life story instilled in Howard a faith in Australia’s tradition and history, embodied in ultimate form on the battlefield, from Gallipoli to Kokoda. He has recruited the power of patriotism and the
'common man as hero' folklore to the service of the Liberal Party. His insights are acute precisely because Howard has the same cast of mind as the common man. He knows that nationalism is on the rise in Australia. (p. 30)

Kelly’s observations suggest explanations for many of the core themes behind the selection of photographic opportunities constructed during his decade in office. Morris (interview with author, 2006) sees no such contrivance, insisting that “it just so happens that defence and foreign policy issues are prominent in the recent political cycle”.

Howard is renowned for his discipline and drive to be in control. It is useful to tease out this characteristic to some degree because it is consistent with a hardline management of pic facs. For instance, Henderson (1998, pp. 7-21), points to John Howard’s pedantry and preference for protocol. There are other aspects of prime ministerial assertiveness. Kingston (p. 51) claims Howard ordered welcoming home parades for Australian troops from Iraq. She says although the troops were entitled to be met by the country’s head of state [Governor-General], Howard “tore up our protocols and transformed himself into Australia’s de-facto generalissimo”. Kingston’s insights suggest Howard’s office is powerful, assertive and singularly bullish when it comes to controlling public impressions of who is in charge of the country and the nation’s heart and soul, as in figures 10 and 11 below.

**Figures 10 and 11**

Representing the nation’s heart and soul:
*Welcome home event for Middle East operations group (left) (June 2003) and comforting victim of London transport bombings (July 2005)*

(Source for figure 10: Defence Department from www.defence.gov.au/.../o40603/2003_S074_053.jpg)
Bongiorno provides corroboration:

He realises that Sir William Deane [former Governor-general] had tapped into the mood of the body politic, the society, by going to Interlaken [in Switzerland] with the sprigs of wattle. He decided he did not want the Governor-General to be the chief mourner. He has become the chief mourner. He is the one who holds mourners in his arms and allows them to cry on his shoulder. He’s the one who lays the wreaths, makes the speeches and turns up at key moments of national grief. (Interview with author, 2006)

Marr and Wilkinson (2003, p. 277) document the Howard camp’s attachment to powerful pictorial images. A photograph used in Liberal Party election material in 2001 showed a resolute Howard with his fists clenched, flanked by flags, an image of a “determined Howard defending his country”. Political creed and successful image need to be synchronised if one is to reinforce the other. Milne and others cited earlier argue that the parading of the Australian flag “is perfectly consistent with Howard’s belief system”, explaining:

Always the PR, the set dressing, the symbolism and the imagery has got to be consistent with leader’s belief and personality. The classic example where that fell to bits was when Latham became a leader, they had to fix up all those remarks about Bush and the rest of it. He held a meeting with the US ambassador and then came out and did a press conference. Someone from his office had stupidly put him between an Australian and American flag and it just bombed. Two months earlier he was saying everything bad about Bush and now just because you’re leader, you expect us to believe you’ve changed your mind. That was a disaster for him because that became the story. (Interview with author, 2006)

It is hardly surprising that powerful pictures, used as part of the armoury aimed at retaining office, inspired a Howard Government to favour such a construction of politically-inspired photo opportunities. Milne (interview with author, 2006) argues politicians can change the direction of a story by taking the opportunity for a good picture. For example, when the Prime Minister posed for pictures at the Special Air Service regiment’s barracks after he farewelled another contingent leaving for Afghanistan, the backdrop was illuminating (see figure 12 below).
Behind Howard is an assemblage of selected items of military equipment put there just for the occasion, according to a local press report:

Security at the Special Air Service headquarters at Swanbourne was tightened after September 11, and that includes keeping the press off the base to photograph and interview the Prime Minister. So when John Howard rolled up again on Wednesday to farewell another 190 troops off to Afghanistan, the SAS again brought the regiment outside. This involves wheeling out a stripped down, specially-built SAS six-wheeled Land Rover and leaving it in the car park outside. Then a camouflage net is strung up on the fence behind it, and the PM and his Defence Minister, Robert Hill, park themselves in front of the whole Hollywood set. Television viewers around Australia, unaware of the subterfuge with tight camera shots, have the distinct impression that the PM is being interviewed in the inner sanctum of Australia's much loved elite special force. (Movie-set props for PM at SAS, 2005, p. 4).

Milne says this event "was just like a theatrical production" (interview with author, 2006). This was done especially for the purpose of making Howard appear in charge of the nation's defence, even to the extent of placing guns in view of the cameras.
In a similar vein, Mares (2001, p. 134) labels the 2001 poll the khaki election, successfully fought over the issues of border protection and security against terrorism. Given the subsequent recovery of political stocks, it is little wonder the khaki theme has become a recurring one during Howard’s recent years in office, dominating his international travels, his rhetoric and many of his more striking TV appearances.

Figure 13
Wrapped: PM honoured in Sydney at the presentation by the US Government of the Woodrow Wilson award in 2005

(Source: photos.reuters.com/Pictures/galleries/Stories...)

Bongiorno believes pictures, such as figure 13 above, have been absolutely influential in associating the PM with national security and an international coalition formed around a fight against terrorism, frequently equated to war.

This one picture does everything he'd want done in the sense [that it says] however close Bob Hawke or even Paul Keating was to the US presidents, he has enmeshed Australia with its greatest ally and is wrapped in the security blanket of the American flag which all the opinion polls in Australia show is a huge plus. That picture would be one that Howard couldn’t really pay for. (Interview with author, 2006)

Howard’s attachment to evocative images has, on occasions, drawn criticism. For instance in the 2004 election campaign, Schubert (2004) reported that the PM’s party issued a glossy brochure using pictures of
soldiers and of Howard with the national flag. His opponents claimed he was exploiting the military for political purposes.

Sport is another platform often chosen to portray the prime ministerial passion. Australia's sporting obsessions are well understood and again Howard's embrace of sporting contests and heroes is no mere concoction. Morris says Howard likes certain sports (interview with author, 2006) but his tastes have limitations. Milne points out that the Prime Minister has never been to the Melbourne Cup:

Tony O'Leary, his press secretary, has said: It's just not him. He's from a Methodist background. He doesn't like gambling. It just wouldn't look right. So I think that's a good example. Hawke went to the Melbourne Cup all the time and everyone said 'of course, where else would he be on Melbourne Cup day?'. (Interview with author, 2006)

How does John Howard seem to hit the right note so consistently with his media image? It is the result of extraordinary diligence and cultivated acumen. By every measure, he has put in the hard yards. He reads the daily newspapers assiduously (Bongiorno, interview with author, 2006) and it has made him something of a natural when it comes to understanding the nuances and implications of how politics are reported to the Australian public and being able to respond accordingly. As Oakes (2006a) testifies, Howard "briefs himself on everything that's in the media from the moment he gets up in the morning, and he knows how to use it". Hence the PM is rarely a victim of media coverage; he is overwhelmingly a controller of the coverage. Bongiorno labels Howard (interview with author, 2006) "his own best press secretary". Milne notes that the PM and his chief media adviser O'Leary have been together for a decade, adding in the specific context of pic facs: "They know each other's minds pretty well so it's almost Howard picking his [media] venues by proxy and he doesn't do anything he doesn't want to" (interview with author, 2006).

As 'talent' for media coverage, Prime Minister Howard has reached an unparalleled high point in Australian political history. No previous national
leader has been as ubiquitous in his media exposure. It is a record driven by two main forces: John Howard’s natural propensity to be a “consummate consumer and user of the media” (Taylor, 2005) and the “enormously successful information management on the part of the Howard government” (Kelly, radio interview, 2006). In this respect, Kelly argues, Howard has really altered the nature of the prime ministership. He observes: “No Prime Minister has spent as much time on the media or on the message as John Howard does . . . he’s perfected the art of the permanent campaign, and he’s got enormous resources.”

According to Canberra press gallery veterans like Oakes, “John Howard himself is the most media-savvy Prime Minister we’ve ever had” (Oakes, 2006b). By any historical measure, the Howard leadership profile today represents a massive transformation of the man and the office, the product of longevity, ardour and unremitting attention to media appearances. How this impacts on the working media is the subject of the third chapter.
CHAPTER 3

TRANSMITTERS

More people work in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery than there are elected members of Australia's national Parliament (Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery contact details, 2004). This chapter examines those gallery members and their relationships with the Howard political machine.

The access and opportunity for the gallery's journalists to report the news is invariably shaped by political public relations practitioners because there is such an abundance of them filling roles as gatekeepers and influential shapers of their masters' communications. As previously highlighted, this is particularly true in the crucible that is Canberra. Kelly (1995, p. 257) quotes journalist Peter Wilmoth of The Sunday Age (1994): "The system of reporting Canberra has always, of course, been a symbiotic process which needs to meet the demands of high-turnover journalism and publicity-sensitive (or ravenous) politicians." According to Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006), the politicians who inhabit Canberra "are becoming more sophisticated and their access to the media is increasingly managed and manipulated".

In the news production process, the availability of key interviewees (what is termed 'talent' in the previous chapter) and the day-to-day operational routines of news crews "will have influenced the kinds of decisions taken about what news can be covered" (Selby and Cowdery, 1995, pp. 141-143). Scammel (1996, pp. 122-136) focuses on the example of long-serving British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-90), arguing that she "presided over the introduction and intensification of the techniques of marketing". Scammel insists Thatcher's extraordinary success "ensured that her methods were the model to copy". Such a model has not gone
unnoticed by Mrs Thatcher's politically aligned counterparts in Australia's Liberal Party.

The nature of news gathering, especially for television, gives rise to a notion called “primary definers” in news coverage (Selby and Cowdery, 1995, p. 141). The input from or comments of ‘official bodies’, such as the Thatcher or Howard offices, makes them primary definers because of their inherent importance in establishing a news story. However, Bongiorno and his colleagues (interviews with author, 2006) argue that despite the contrivances of the public relations machinery, it is not mere puffery which gets reported. Re-affirming the concept of primary definers, governments make genuine news, notwithstanding the public relations hoopla. Milne highlights the symbiotic character of the linkages between news maker and news reporter. The maker needs the reporter, he insists:

> On the Prime Minister's overseas trips, for instance, he bends over backwards, more than usual, to make sure we get into pic faces, to ensure we get the hand-shaking beforehand – the grip and grit before any talks – because he needs to portray the image of a Prime Minister hard at work, not just junketing around the place. He needs to keep his presence up. And he also knows he needs to respond to whatever’s happening at home so, particularly in the case of overseas trips, the power balance is a bit different. Whereas when he is at home, he is master of his own domain. (Interview with author, 2006)

The specific case of the Prime Minister as a primary definer is discussed a little later in this chapter.

In Howard’s Canberra, a mutual dependence can be demonstrated between media crews and those in power, at least in operational terms. Morris states (interview with author, 2006): “They would die without each other.” After all, as Craig (2004, p. 83) notes, they spend up to 90 per cent of their working day in the same ‘hothouse’ building, Parliament House.

The analysis of Bongiorno underlines this inter-dependence and also finds virtue in it:
I mean they cannot do without each other. In fact that is the role ascribed to us [the press] in a democratic society. There used to be a great quote from Jefferson on the masthead of the *Courier-Mail* [newspaper] in Brisbane. It goes along the line that you cannot constrain the freedom of the press without constraining the freedom of society. It's only in a free society that you can have a free press. Free in the sense of capable of holding the elected representatives to account. Then of course they too need us to communicate what they are doing. (Interview with author, 2006)

Using the tools of the written and spoken word, journalists are required to apply objectivity to news reporting but the same may not be possible with pictures when power brokers and gatekeepers orchestrate the settings available to cameras. News crews stationed in Canberra are inevitably at the mercy of Howard's media appearances for access and content. Do media workers and politicians tend to create a 'staged world', a reality of their own? Morris believes this to be the case:

Canberra is an artificial place. The Parliament and the people in it occupy a little world unto themselves. In that setting, the politicians have enormous power to generate news. The place is a mixture of a club, a game, a mutual admiration and a mutual hatred. (Interview with author, 2006)

So there is a pronounced inter-dependence between reporting politics and occupying political office. For instance, the influence of the media in modern life, especially politics, is thoroughly canvassed in Craig's work (2004). He argues that media shapes the very nature of modern public life, summarised in the phrase, 'mediated public life'. He adds: “The public generally do not directly encounter politicians and public issues but rather encounter media images, representations and stories about those politicians and public issues” (2004, p. 4). With the exception of talk-back radio, which should probably warrant a study of its own around its audience's capacity to engage politicians on the callers' terms, the 'mediation' of national public life would seem to be an unquestionable truth given the massive separation of Australia's federal political fulcrum from its population centres.
The structure of media operations in Australia’s national capital is highly pertinent in this context. Gelber (1994, pp. 23-24), in examining trends in Australian public affairs in the mid-1990s, describes the concentration of news management in Canberra as “quite remarkable”. As a result, he identifies the press gallery as acquiring “an increasingly influential role in formulating the nation’s agenda for discussion”. Government media officers play a decisive role, according to Gelber, because of the massive resources at the disposal of an incumbent government. In discussing “the production chains of political communications”, Moloney, Richards, Scullion and Daymon (2003, p. 166) identify the “dominance of spin as the ruling form of news management”.

Linden (1997, p. 32) refers to the media’s hunger for pictures and the way politicians take advantage of this. He argues that “these types of pictures help to create a desirable image of the person being photographed”. This value of assessment is enhanced by Craig’s observation that news media visual images generate credibility (2004, p. 97).

The editors of the *British Journal of Photography* (4 May 2005) interviewed professional photographers in Britain about the challenges of photographing politicians today. This task, the journal concluded, has never been harder, adding: “Media access has become increasingly restricted and the politicians progressively better groomed as they and their assistants try to control the image they present to the public”. Jeff Mitchell of Reuters complains of everything being “so stage-managed now . . . far too controlled” (British Journal of Photography, 2005).

Milne (interview with author, 2006) believes this observation absolutely applies to the Australian Prime Minister. He notes: “The more senior you are, the more controlled the environment but in the case of the Prime Minister completely. There is no uncontrolled access to him except maybe socially.” Morris (interview with author, 2006) says while photographers
would always prefer to catch people off guard, the politicians prefer media access to be a lot more structured. The scale of Parliament House in Canberra contributes to this segregation, as do security concerns. Media operatives are restricted in their access to parts of the Parliament building by the isolation of members-only areas and screening and tighter control of movements.

The tendency of politicians and media players to create the 'staged world' referred to earlier in this chapter is accepted with resignation by Milne (interview with author, 2006) who says it has a brutal truth because the gallery members have little say in it. He elaborates:

We would prefer that it was completely unstructured. We would like to be able to walk into the Prime Minister's office and throw a few questions at him any time of the day or night. So, at base, no I don't think we are complicit. Having said that, because of the control features of the office, we do become complicit because we need the pictures – in particular the pictures – we need the access so we abide by the rules because that's the only way we can get the access. But do we like it? No.

According to Bongiorno, the press gallery in Canberra concentrates basically on Prime Minister Howard as leader: "Incumbency favours the leader of a government" (interview with author, 2006). In her fly-on-the-wall narrative about the workings of the press gallery in Australia's Parliament House, Simons (1999, p.13) identifies several inter-connected strands: the dominance of a leader in media coverage, the natural supremacy of government announcements and the time-critical and access-sensitive operational constraints of a centralised media operation.

The Gallery literally lives in Canberra. Its ranks have a typically slower turnover than other reporting rounds in Australian media outlets, according to the chief executive officer of News Limited (Hartigan, 2004). Its members have a daily obligation to help fill a certain amount of space in their employers' newspapers and airwaves. They must inevitably rely for a
quotient of their reporting output on the 'prime definers' such as the PM. Morris has no doubt leaders have the ability to set the news agenda:

The office of this Prime Minister has a particular power to set an agenda and to adjust that agenda. It is an enormous power. It revolves around the understanding that while ordinary politicians can talk about things, it is the leaders who can do things. So when a leader is saying something or making an announcement or unveiling a decision it becomes real. For example, if the leader is announcing the despatch of troops to fight overseas, it makes sense to do that in an army setting. If the leader is making an announcement about water resources, it makes sense to do that alongside a river or dam. (Interview with author, 2006)

Similarly Bongiorno recognises the public relations-inspired selection of venues for new project, program and policy announcements by government, citing the examples of a child-care centre for a major resource allocation for child care or a road construction site for an announcement of funding for a new highway. He pinpoints why journalists cannot avoid such tactics:

There is no doubt there is a lot of PR in all of that but what makes it news is that if you’re in government you can announce at this site, with this prop, with this PR, something that is real and new. (Interview with author, 2006)

In exploring this ability of governments to offer the media little choice in the presentation of announcements, Bongiorno also highlights the extent to which the leader's public relations and political strategists will sometimes go in order to continue to accrue mileage, that is, coverage of the PM transmitting political messages via the media. He says (interview with author, 2006) Howard has travelled to southern China three times to support and preside over the sale of LNG from Australia’s North-West Shelf. The deal has been announced and re-announced on each occasion. He went there again for the arrival of the inaugural supply of the gas. Bongiorno poses:
Is it real? Yes, it is real. Is it news? Well, it is not brand new, no. Is the arrival of the first shipment news? Yes, but it is not really hard news. So there is an example of spending a hell of a lot of money for a very expensive picture facility (pic fac) which reinforces that his government is on about cementing trade with China which is of course now an engine room of the Australian economy if not a lot of other economies as well. (Interview with author, 2006)

Thomson (1997, pp. 11-12) considers the importance of appearance in building political reputations. She notes the view of historian Andrew Roberts about the importance of “good props”. These are identifiers for the readers and viewers of political coverage. If props are indeed seen as legitimate aids to public recognition, it strengthens an interpretation of Prime Minister Howard’s regular donning of a wide-brimmed hat as a means of reinforcing his brand of mateship and conveying an impression that he handles harsh environments and empathises with those facing hardship, as figure 14 (below) illustrates.

![Figure 14](http://www.theage.com.au/news/National/Aboriginal-shakeup-plan/2005/02/28/1109546795555.html)

Linden (1997, p. 32) refers to the media’s hunger for pictures and the way politicians take advantage of this. He argues that “these types of pictures help to create a desirable image of the person being photographed”. Scammel (1996, pp. 122-136) takes this line of reasoning further when he suggests that marketing influences “the tone and tenor” of actual policy
stances. This effect resonates in Howard’s case where constructed photo opportunities reinforce the flavour of policy positions, especially those pertaining to traits, described by Brett (cited in Manne, 2004, p. 86), such as nationalism or practical mateship — meaning in essence, Australians supporting Australians. Hence a prevailing and sustained theme in Howard’s photo opportunities is an empathy with defence force personnel, volunteers and victims of tragedy. The August 2006 announcement of an increase in the size of the Australian Army is an illustration of a pic fac constructed to add weight to a policy decision of the government. Figure 15 shows the PM in the presence of the chiefs of each of the three branches of the armed services and the flags representing each arm. The picture was taken at Defence Department headquarters.

![Figure 15](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Figure 15**

*Fronting all the brass: PM’s preferred style of announcing army expansion.*

(Source: The Australian, 25 August 2006, p. 4)

In years past, a Prime Minister making such an announcement normally would have chosen to make a statement to the Parliament, but particularly during the Howard decade in power there has been a marked shift away from the formal forum of Parliament towards settings contrived in such a way as to offer appeal to the press and TV cameras. In this case, the scale
and gravity of such an announcement would always attract reportage by gallery members, but by orchestrating and 'dressing' the chosen site for the announcement, the Prime Minister is also offering the working media a greater degree of visual lure. Such an approach typifies the way in which the Canberra gallery is almost inevitably 'captured' by the PM's tactics.

Herman's essay, *Gatekeeper Versus Propaganda Models: A critical American perspective*, (cited in Golding, Murdock and Schlesinger, 1986, pp. 172-176) further explores the inter-dependence between news seeker and news maker. The symbolism inherent in figure 15 resonates strongly when considering Herman's observations:

News organisations seek efficient sources of authoritative and credible news on a regular basis. These are interconnected: the more authoritative and credible the source, the easier it is to accept statements without checking, and the less expensive is news-making. Furthermore, assertions of high authority are news-worthy in and of themselves ... the source that best meets these standards is, of course, the government. (p. 172)

While it would be misguided to suggest the Canberra press gallery is anything but fiercely questioning of the Prime Minister's media output within the news gathering process, nevertheless, for the reasons Herman identifies, it could be argued that the resultant coverage is invariably going to reflect at least some measure of prime ministerial flavour and/or atmospherics. Herman says in foreign policy, especially, governments have a unique position as primary news source, giving them "tremendous manipulative powers" (p.172). The literature on the post-1996 Government's activities in the field of foreign policy suggest these powers are not lost on Howard and his Ministers nor resisted by the media practitioners responsible for filling air waves and print columns. Contrast, for example, the reporting of the occasional ministerial visits to Baghdad with the regular on-the-ground reporting from the same city. When ministers are involved, the content of news reports reflects the ministerial activities but when daily life in the Iraqi capital is the subject of reporting, the emphasis in the news is on the ongoing conflict and violence. This
example illustrates the potency of Herman's concept of primary news source.

Bongiorno concurs on the extent of manipulative powers available to the occupants of office. He summarises the prevailing state of affairs in Canberra (interview with author, 2006): “This government is very tight in its management of news sources.” He uses an example in which visual images played a critical part:

One of the most shameful exploitations of imagery was the declaration of war on the Tampa. The Tampa was a mercy ship and we declared war on it. They [the Australian authorities] closed down the air space so the news helicopters could not go to it. They did not want any images of asylum seekers women and children. They banned all photography. It wasn’t until the Daily Telegraph in Sydney got e-mailed images from the ship and put them on the front page that people began to realise that these were actually human beings. They were able to claim, for instance, that no-one’s life was at risk; however, when the military doctors went on board the Tampa there were women nearly dying due to dehydration. They weren’t allowed to be taken off the ship but had to be hydrated on the deck of the ship. We sent in the SAS, for God’s sake, in full black military gear with sub-machine guns and the rest of it which painted the image, reinforced back in Australia, that the Tampa was a threat to our security. (Interview with author, 2006)

Bongiorno calls it probably the most shameful exploitation of imagery by a desperate government behind in the polls at the beginning of that year. He concludes that it was a ruthless exploitation of fear in the community.

Those who spend their days reporting national politics in Australia would have little room to move if they wanted to spurn the Government’s highly structured communications strategies. The “increased use of media advisers, media units and of overt and covert PR strategies for maximising favourable news coverage and containing unwanted publicity” (Ward and Stewart, 2006, p. 204) ensures that after a decade of the Howard supremacy, the press gallery comprises journalists and photographers unavoidably, if undesirably, cast as transmitters of the Government’s messages. Milne summarises the dilemma thus:
The truth is if the pictures are too good, they will run, even though my instincts journalistically may be ‘look, I know I’m being conned here’. But the fact of the matter is you can’t get around the pictures. And of course, if you don’t run them, your competitors will and your news editor will put a boot up your arse. So in that sense, we can be captive [to PR]. (Interview with author, 2006)

From the point of view of the supreme public relations strategist, Morris has a blunt and unapologetic message for the working media:

Let’s face it, there is more PR than ever and the media just has to deal with it. I can’t imagine a news editor or a TV editor would be very impressed if a reporter just declared they were not going to cover a certain story just because there was a PR person involved in organising it. (Interview with author, 2006)

From the point of view of some leading lights of political journalism, it is regrettable. Blumer and Gurevitch (cited in Curran and Gurevitch, 2005, p. 108) talk of the sensitivity of journalists being “affronted” by politicians’ attempts to manage the news in their favour. Pilger (2005) says Australia has one of the most “restricted medias in the Western world . . . journalists are very close to politicians”. Meade (2006) reports that one of the doyens of the Canberra gallery, Michelle Grattan, of The Age, according to her editor, is no longer interested in travelling abroad with the Prime Minister because access to him is so limited. Salter (2006) finds that the PM and his senior ministers have enjoyed an extraordinarily easy ride from the media: “This has been achieved not so much by the cultivation of proprietary benevolence as through the masterful manipulation of the political agenda and limits within which the media’s version of public debate has been confined.” Gawenda (2005) concludes: “Even the best reporters can get too close to their contacts, too cosy with them.”

As to what the public makes of it all, the next chapter analyses the electoral dynamics of the Howard image.
CHAPTER 4

TARGETS

According to opinion polls, the Australian electorate at large has progressively felt more comfortable with the Howard prime ministership, identifying him with a range of attributes which, while perhaps failing to earn a passionate embrace, have served to attract respect and a sense of reliability. Pollster Gary Morgan (cited at roymorgan.com, 2006) notes: "Howard’s experience over many years was frequently mentioned in special qualitative research — it is clear he has built and maintained significant trust with electors". Among the attributes are a number that have been regularly conveyed and reinforced by the media’s visual portrayal of the Prime Minister. As discussed in the second chapter above, for instance, Howard has readily stepped out as a consoler and comforter in the face of tragedies besetting Australians. Using the example of the Port Arthur massacre (1996) and the first Bali terrorist bombings (2002), Morris recalls the Prime Minister comforting distressed survivors and relatives of victims and concludes: "The pictures work because John Howard is naturally nice." (Interview with author, 2006)

The judgements and emotions aroused by media images rate as important, according to Milne (interview with author, 2006):

As much as judging the images, I would say more accurately that [people] respond to them - whether they think their leader looks appropriate, looks strong . . . those sorts of buttons I think. Often the image can over-ride the actual message, that is, in print the written word and in television the voice-over. If they [the pictures] are strong enough, they will dictate how people will respond to the story.

If the essential purpose of effective political leadership is to engage the support of the electorate at large, identified here as ‘the targets’, the measure of Howard’s success is the primary focus of this penultimate chapter.
Among the most simple yet striking testaments to Howard’s triumph are his election victories and his consistent ratings in public opinion polling. Newspoll, in conjunction with *The Australian* newspaper, regularly surveys a sample of voters. Among other things, these polls test how satisfied respondents are with the way Howard is doing his job. As figure 16 (below) illustrates, in the past five years, the PM’s satisfaction rating has averaged 52 per cent. This measure of approval corresponds with typical observations collected by the Morgan poll in its qualitative research. Here is a recent example:

“He’s got the runs on the board, so to speak, and this experience generates trust”, “He has won four elections, and is better than any other Prime Minister for a long time”, “He’s really proved himself”, “Better the devil you know”, “John Howard is a proven performer”, “John Howard has kept the country on the right track, it’s gone forward with him”, “John Howard has more experience and makes the tough decisions when they need to be made”. (Morgan, 2006)
To what extent poll results reflect satisfaction with performance as distinct from effective branding and salesmanship is open to question. Ruddock (2001, p. 80) stresses that "public opinion can be seen as the product of informed, rational minds, or it can be seen as the product of politically motivated manipulation by political elites, the mass media or both". At the same time Morgan measures public expectations on which major political party is likely to hold office at a given time. From a strong majority, who expects the Liberal-National coalition to be ascendant, some typical views are recorded:

Supporters were impressed with the L-NP Government and the leadership of John Howard, with comments such as: 'John Howard has handled the country well', 'I agree with most of what John Howard does — I am confident in his abilities', 'I am very happy with John Howard and his Government'. (Morgan, 2005)

Taylor (2005) believes the PM's office is "obviously doing something right", adding: "The boss' has won four elections. Over all those years his satisfaction ratings have seldom fallen below 50 per cent. He has reformed the economy and shifted the social and cultural zeitgeist of the nation."

It is illuminating to consider the link between a government's policy and the way it is 'sold'. Heith (2001, pp. 742-743) cites a book by Jacobs and Shapiro in which they identify "dynamic configurations and processes of inter-dependence" of policy making, media coverage and public opinion. They claim that democratic governance and the process of public communications are inseparably linked. John Howard's style of photographed 'set piece' occasions would seem to recognise such a link because these events feed his acceptance by the electorate as a leader of substance and relevance. The visual impact of Howard's appearances enhances the poignancy of his pitch. For instance, the PM's message about steadfastly 'finishing the job' (as in continuing military deployment in Iraq), while he is pictured standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a soldier or a world leader, as in figure 17 below, is more penetrating than a line delivered at the despatch box of the House of Representatives.
To win approval with the voting public, the most successful leaders might take one of two routes: let a natural brilliance shine as they excel in the performance of their office or, in the absence of such a gift, parade a degree of sheer ordinariness with which the citizenry may find an affinity. The mission is to strike and sustain the right chord with people while ensuring they believe that as leader you know what you are doing. Howard has cultivated this ability and reaped the rewards of polling triumphs.

In John Howard's case, numerous examples of hitting the correct chord are documented here. Figures 18 and 19 (below) reflect the aforementioned prime ministerial penchant for sporting contests and competitors, what Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006) calls an association with the Australian sporting ethos.
According to Bongiorno, Howard, like [former prime minister] Bob Hawke “was already a cricket tragic and sport nut”, so the Howard fondness for sporting contests is genuine even if the way he manifests this passion is “exploitative”. (Interview with author, 2006)

While sport provides prime ground for a leader to align himself with the competitors, warriors and heroes commonly idolised by ordinary citizens, who are themselves identified as ‘Howard’s battlers’, the same sort of thinking can be extended to a range of other fronts. In previous chapters above, attention has been given to Prime Minister Howard’s ability to reach out to the nation’s heart and soul on the occasions of dire drama. But he can achieve a similar impact on a more modest and frequent scale simply by ensuring he figures almost incessantly in the nation’s news chronicle.

The media has changed significantly since the start of the 1990s, driven by technological developments which “continue to create new distribution platforms for information and entertainment content” (Peters, 2005). The number of media outlets has proliferated and, in Australian households and workplaces, the spectrum of news and information sources available to ordinary consumers has risen markedly. Platforms including pay television, online services and mobile phones, according to Peters (2005), “have experienced strong growth to date”. Morris notes: “Today’s media
cycle is so rapid” (interview with author, 2006). Often in the most simple, unstylish ways, John Howard has been able to ride this wave of constant media production. The best example is the morning “totemic power walk” (Milne, interview with author, 2006).

According to Milne, the walk (figure 20) suggests a great deal:

It’s not just a walk. It shows he’s fit; it shows he’s determined; and he does it in a green and gold track suit which sends another message. At the time we were going into the Iraq war, there was a group of protesters who ambushed him outside Kirribilli House on his morning power walk. The whole issue was tested in focus groups by the Liberal Party and that incident was recalled. The focus group didn’t care about the demonstration or the war. All that impressed them was the fact that the protesters were mostly young and Howard outpaced them. That’s the message voters took out of that, not about the war at all. (Interview with author, 2006)

![Figure 20](image)

Excerpt of a page from a document discussing John Howard's morning power walk as a totemic event for the media cycle. The text highlights how the walk symbolizes fitness, determination, and Howard's energy, self-discipline, and single-mindedness, even when the focus was on protests against the Iraq war. The image accompanying the text shows a morning walk with John Howard and others, illustrating the daily routine that has become an icon for media capturing the news cycle. (Source: www.melbourne2006.com.au/M2006/HomePage+News/...)

Price (2006, July) also reads much into the PM’s dawn patrol: “That much-filmed morning walk is now as important to the PM’s image as it is for his general health. Ignore the gaudy tracksuits and you can discern Howard’s energy, self-discipline and single-mindedness in every furious step.”
Katauskas (2006) agrees: "He [Howard] knows that the walk is a PR exercise. He knows it's saying 'I'm young, I'm fit and I'm still in control'."

The walk is typical of the recurring ways the Prime Minister manages to buy into the round-the-clock news cycle, well illustrated by the example in figure 21 above. Megalogenis (2006) says: "No-one manages the 24-hour news cycle better than John Howard." The Prime Minister himself is quite candid about this trend:

I thought the media was a big part of my life when I became Prime Minister. I had no idea what a big part of my life it would be over the last ten years. If it was all pervasive and omnipresent in 1996, it is doubly or trebly so in 2006. We do live in a 24 hour news cycle, 7 days a week. (News Room, PM’s web site)

Price (2006, March) observes: "These days the PM makes himself available for funerals, natural disasters, moments of sporting heroism, bar mitzvahs, weddings, anything." As a result, using the example of the PM’s many appearances at Commonwealth games events in Melbourne, Price finds Howard earns a "weird supermodel treatment everywhere he goes". In essence, the philosophy guiding the Howard image might be stated simply as: If you do things that connect you with the punters, your esteem will grow.
Establishing a persona with genuinely good intentions has had another major benefit for Howard. He's been able to use this technique to quell or even reverse what on the surface would appear to be a paradox. His commitment to truth is questionable, according to a number of authoritative commentators. In essence, blanketing the news cycle with endless contributions to the thoughts and affairs of the nation would seem to have allowed him to get away with lies, contradictions and back-flips. Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006) notes that Howard is “capable of saying one thing and doing the exact opposite . . . something he has mastered and seems to be forgiven for” by the general populace and media commentators.

Grant (2006) depicts Howard as a shrewd politician who keeps his finger on the public pulse “and shows his feelings only on immaculate occasions”. At the same time, he believes that during the Howard decade in office “the record of cagey political management has lengthened.” He provides this analysis:

In public debate, the Prime Minister nips and tucks, using words, especially adjectives, carefully so that he can later disown sentiments that he had seemed earlier to be endorsing. As he is neither a blatant bigot nor simple-minded, he does not appear to be lowering standards, whether of competence or morality. He appears, rather, to be trying to be sensible. But the effect is that the issue is allowed to crumble or evaporate in a flurry of self-protective corrections, refinements and denials, as well as complex, bureaucratic outcomes. (Grant, 2006)

Citing the stand-off between Howard and his deputy over a future leadership transfer, Oakes (2006b) is more blatant: “John Howard is exposed as a purveyor of porkies and his support grows.” He notes the punters want Howard [to stay on], saying “they don’t care if he lied”. Grattan (2006) brings the matter back to the bottom line upon which this chapter is focused: the Prime Minister’s popularity with the electorate. She notes: “. . . polling has reinforced an established point: people think
Howard is loose with the truth, but when it comes to running the country, that doesn't worry them." Illustrating her argument, Grattan reports that 51 per cent of people polled in September 2004, considered Howard has 'generally been dishonest' about the so-called children overboard affair, yet despite this controversy over his truthfulness, Howard made 'trust' a successful election theme that same year. It seems Grant (1999, p. 68) was close to the mark when, referring to illustrations from the office of New Zealand's first woman prime minister Jenny Shipley – boasting a coterie of spin doctors – he argued "prime ministers never tell it as it actually is".

Howard's justification for sending troops to Iraq, centred on weapons of mass destruction, is another example where sincerity and the sort of allies you might find on a Texas ranch, reinforced in media images such as figure 22, have generated strong waves of absolution. Shanahan (2005) observes that satisfaction with Howard "rose back above 50 per cent in Newspoll" after a trip to meet Bush in Washington, Blair in London and Australian troops in Baghdad.

Partly by way of explaining such phenomenon, Morris argues people have long known what Howard stands for:

Everyone who enters politics starts as a blank canvas. By the time one might rise to the position of leader, you would hope that two-thirds of that canvas would be filled in with the public's perception of who you are and what you're on about. Now, clearly it's best if you can fill that in yourself. That happened with Howard. By the time of the 1996 election, he was seen as a safe pair of hands; someone who
likes Australia and likes his family. Over and above that people saw that he will try to do what he thinks is right. The other thing that needs to be emphasised is that Howard's image is a reflection of the man himself. It's an authentic image. One of the admirable characteristics of Australians is their irreverence. They see through people and actions that are not what they seem or set out to be. If it doesn't smell right, the Australian people won't buy it. (Interview with author, 2006)

Howard's manner in public seems to reinforce his acceptance. He rarely uses written speech notes. Milne (interview with author, 2006) says a lot of ordinary people he has met "are absolutely gob-smacked at his [Howard's] ability to speak without notes. I think he understands that. These people say 'this bloke really knows his stuff, he hasn't got a line [written down]."

An ability to project the qualities of an ordinary man in himself is another hallmark of the Howard style. Bongiorno (interview with author, 2006) says the PM normally speaks with a flat tone — because of a hearing impairment — and uses language rather sparingly. He points to an image of being a careful and, in the context of the economy, parsimonious manager "reinforced by what he looks like and what he sounds like" (interview with author, 2006). Steketee (2006) says that these days "Howard assiduously peddles his ordinariness". Bongiorno further states:

Once in office, one of the things that was never on view when he was unelectable of course is that the man is an astute student of politics. He's cunning; he can prosecute an argument in a way that doesn't alienate people. He has very little dramatic or rhetorical flair (interview with author, 2006).

Crosby (2006), applying the intimate knowledge he acquired of Howard while federal director of the Liberal Party of Australia, explains:

Howard is certainly no glamour puss. He eschews the notion of celebrity and you rarely see him on the social pages or surrounded by luvvies. Yet when you observe the way the public respond (sic) to him in the street, or in the community meetings he regularly attends
in city halls, public parks or school gymnasiums around the nation, you see his capacity to connect with people.

Why has John Howard been able to cultivate a plain but respected persona with the electorate? One clue emerges from his clever study of politics, referred to by Bongiorno when he says Howard admits he has learned something from all of his predecessors:

He studied them closely with a living memory, probably going back as far as Billy McMahon (because he worked on the McMahon campaign). People said: 'What have you learnt?'. And he replied: 'That’s for you to find out.' He said I’ve learned what to do and what not to do'. (Interview with author, 2006)

Walter (2004, p. 18) credits Brett with showing “how Howard, scorning the intelligentsia, determinedly committed to plain speaking, has fashioned an enormously powerful message that professes to speak for the ‘ordinary battler’”. Walter also identifies a way in which changes in the operation of the political system in Australia also assist the PM. He detects a rise in prime ministerial power aligned to a decline in party loyalty and participation, suggesting “weaker voter attachments enhance the role of the leader” (2004, p. 15), resulting in a diminished concentration on policy and more on the personality of the leader.

Roskam (2006) concurs:

To most voters, personality is more important than policy or politics. Voters aren’t stupid. There’s a reason they think this way. Politics and the events that determine politics are unpredictable – and voters know this. (p.82)

Kelly (2006) finds that the national government today possesses “an overall apparatus . . . [which is] enormously important”. It includes activities such as polling, determining the message(s), signals from the Prime Minister and the role of the PM in “setting the ground rules for the political debate”. This apparatus provides abundant scope for shaping and projecting an image for the head of government, especially when he
chooses, like Howard does, to be ‘out there’ all the time speaking to and being seen with representatives of ‘voter land’. In reflecting on a typically hectic week of whistlestop visits by the Prime Minister, Tingle (2006) recalled that “someone once dubbed Howard the Energiser bunny”.

The clinical explanation for this phenomenon is a ceaseless quest to control the media message. The cynical explanation is a remorseless quest to smother the media coverage. It seems to work around a formula which might be expressed simply as:

\[ \text{News happens} + \text{PM injects himself into news} = \text{Howard is perceived to be in charge.} \]

One of Howard’s predecessors, John Hewson, who has been increasingly a critic since departing from politics himself, summarises the way such a formula operates in these terms:

Howard is probably the most skilful politician I have seen in decades in this country. He has a well-refined capacity to respond to circumstances and events as they unfold, and to turn them to his particular political advantage, irrespective of the real and substantive outcomes from a policy point of view. (Hewson, 2006)

The notion of the ubiquitous news maker covers all media and all forms within those media. For instance, despite an oft-professed unwillingness or reluctance to ‘provide a running commentary’ on a story figuring significantly in the aforementioned 24-hour news cycle, the Prime Minister frequently engages in just such a commentary. Over the course of a typical day, he can do a radio interview with one of a band of favourite talk-back hosts or an ABC program, do an industry or electorate visit in front of TV and press cameras, make a major speech, conduct a press conference and do an evening ‘doorstop’ [brief statement to the media] if a big, late-breaking story appears on the horizon such as an act of terrorism abroad or the death of a public figure at home.
A revealing example of how the Howard media strategy works is illustrated in figures 23 and 24 below. In April 2006 when the Prime Minister’s turn arrived to appear as a witness before the Cole Commission of Inquiry into the AWB Ltd’s wheat sales to Iraq, Howard’s assertive arrival (figure 22) contrasted with the frenzied and clandestine arrivals on previous days of fellow Cabinet ministers Vaille (who scrambled through a crowd in the street) and Downer (who accessed an internal passageway from an adjoining office block) respectively. While Howard’s testimony was open to all the working press inside the inquiry to report, the PM gave the media much more.

![Figure 23](http://www.smh.com.au/fximage/2006/04/13/howard_wideweb_470x346.jpg)

*Figure 23*  
*Nothing to fear: PM arrives at the Cole Commission of inquiry to give evidence*  

After his session in the witness box, he returned to his Sydney office and held a full-scale press conference (figure 24) in which he made observations about his own and others’ evidence before Justice Cole. Not surprisingly, this approach gave the media many more pictures, sound bites and prime ministerial statements than they could have derived from the brief spell the PM had in the witness box. No doubt this was precisely the aim of Howard and his media advisers.
Figure 24

Telling it his way: PM gives his version of issues before Cole at a press conference.


So in this case, the public glimpsed the PM's authoritative presence at the AWB commission but acquired huge 'slices' of prime ministerial justification, denial and explanation through the device of the subsequent press conference. This is an example of the Howard media strategy at its best – assert maximum control whenever possible.

In the minds of the targets of this strategy – the Australian voting public – the Howard image comprises characteristics of the chameleon in which the most enduring face is that of the conviction politician who deserves respect because he exudes decent Australian values and sentiments. Howard is seen as tirelessly interpreting and enacting the best Australian virtues and aspirations for the benefit of the many minds in which such qualities resonate. As a result, he is perceived by voters as strong and decisive (as figure 25 on the next page illustrates):
### Newpoll Ratings of Leaders as Decisive and Strong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Howard</th>
<th>ALP opponent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-19 September 2004</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 March 2005</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-31 July 2005</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20 November 2005</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12 March 2006</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-16 July 2006</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 25*
(Source: Newspoll, July 19, 2006)
CONCLUSION

John Howard, for the first twenty years of his career in Parliament, acquired a profile as a dogged, earnest and largely colourless politician. His term as Federal Treasurer, which covered about a quarter of that period, would probably not have helped because that particular portfolio is one that traditionally consigns its occupants to a public profile as dour enforcers of fiscal constraint and heartless taxers. The tag of ‘Honest Johnny’ had gained some traction and his ordinariness was unavoidable, as Steketee notes:

Perceptions are what count in politics. The image of Howard as ordinary was a handicap when he was Opposition leader. It cost him the job in 1989 because Liberal MPs thought Andrew Peacock looked more like a leader and was more likely to get them into office the following year. (Steketee, 2006).

For better or for worse, Howard took his established persona into office as Prime Minister in 1996. As Morris (interview with author, 2006) suggests, people had a fair idea of the Howard image by the time this major milestone arrived.

Within a few years, Howard discovered that incumbency and the vast machinery of government delivered a means by which he could earn a reputation based on a curious combination of his long-standing authority and a platform of incessant salesmanship. With the exception perhaps of a fiercely held ideology around industrial relations, Howard was and is still far from a model of political consistency. His term in the office of Prime Minister is littered with examples of backflips and contradictions. Indeed, as Tingle (2003) identifies, radical policy shifts represent Howard’s “greatest sleight of hand with the Australian public.”

He and his advisers discovered that on a stage of their own construction with considerable theatricality and high-octane public relations, Howard
could convince the Australian electorate that he understood their best interests, knew best how to safeguard them and had a boundless capacity to share their joys, wows and fears. “Part of Howard’s genius,” says Oakes (Crikey.com, 2006) “is to look like a reasonable man even when he is engaged in the rankest political opportunism”. Brett’s interpretation (2005) is kinder, crediting Howard with speaking “straight from the heart of the nation and its mainstream”.

Thus a new and highly successful Howard image was built, in no small way through masterful media management. And while his words counted a great deal – when often his deeds did not – the most potent tools of his image have been the visual portrayal, the press and television pictures which tell the Howard story of steadfastness, strength, suppression of doubt and sympathy for the prevailing national mood – be it triumphant, terrified or tragic.

Nothing better illustrates the public relations supremacy of, and irresistible journalistic acquiescence with, the Howard media strategy, which this research project has delineated and documented, than the circumstances and reporting of his 31 July 2006 decision to stay on in office to contest the 2007 election.

Always capable of invoking an element of surprise in the timing of his major announcements, the Prime Minister chose an ordinary Monday morning to reveal his intention to remain in office, following months of speculation and not a few stouches and stand-offs with his long-time deputy, Treasurer Peter Costello.

But the Howard masterstroke was not merely the timing but the fact that he chose to do so on a day when he was far from the corridors of power in Canberra, far from most of the heavy hitters of the press gallery and far from the trappings of his office. He was visiting the small Queensland sugar
town of Silwood. And so the day’s main pic fac oozed all the tailor-made ingredients that Howard and his media machine cherish.

**Figure 26**

*Still the One: The PM again earns the ‘dream’ headline and picture treatment in the national press coverage of the day he announced his intention to stay on in office.*

(Source: *Australian Financial Review*, 1 August 2006; picture by Brian Cassey)

As figure 26 (above) shows, the media treatment was impeccable. The semiotics work superbly: applauding school children, affinity with youth despite turning 67 a week earlier, a wave for the Silwood locals, the bush hat, the open-neck shirt, the blue sky banishing the clouds and the first bold headline of his next political campaign.

Pure politics, pure public relations, pure silk. The tacticians, the talent, the transmitters and the targets all perfectly aligned.
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