

Why Howard goes too far: institutional change and the renaissance of groupthink

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Radio Host: Do you have a question for the prime minister?

Caller: Yes, when is he going to stop lying to us?

Radio Host: What do you mean? Do you have anything specific in mind?

Caller: Well he lied to us over the 'children overboard' affair. He lied to us about why we went to war in Iraq. He lied about...

Radio Host: OK, OK...well, prime minister? (Jon Faine morning show, ABC Radio 774 Melbourne, May 19, 2004)

It's children overboard all over again. John Howard has put on the white gloves of ignorance and blamed everyone else for not telling him about what he should have known of the Iraq prisoner abuse. (Michelle Grattan, *The Age*, June 2, 2004).

An outline of this paper was drafted in January 2004. In May-June, as I started writing, two events brought issues into sharp focus. A caller to a morning talkback program accused the prime minister of lying and when pressed cited a string of instances, starting with the 'children overboard' affair. And a new imbroglio on June 1, 2004, over misinformation relating to Australian knowledge of Iraqi prisoner abuse, immediately elicited the comment, not only from the opposition but also from a range of media commentators, that this was 'children overboard' all over again. How is such short-hand understood in the Australian context? What does it tell us about the way the Australian government operates? In addressing these questions, I relate emerging patterns to institutional transitions that have licensed particular forms of leadership behaviour—forms that suggest the characteristic dysfunctions of groupthink.

'Children Overboard!' The template

In October 2001, as a federal election campaign was about to commence, the Australian prime minister, John Howard, his minister for defence, Peter Reith, and subsequently other senior ministers gave out a disturbing story. Refugees, apprehended at sea in a leaky fishing boat by the Australian navy, had thrown their

children into the sea to force sailors to rescue them and to land them in Australia.

Howard used the story to reveal the dubious character of those illegally trying to enter Australia, and to reassert the principle that his government, and his government alone, would determine who entered Australia, how, and who would be allowed to stay.

This was presented as part of a broader security agenda—an agenda that played well, and is credited with swinging the election in Howard's favour (McAllister, 2003).

The children overboard story was not true.

No children were thrown overboard. The photographs published to verify the incident were taken later, when the ship was sinking...Some of the figures in the water were Australian sailors who had dived in to assist the refugees.

Within three days ... the story was known to be untrue ... by all but the very top level of the defence department ... There was never any evidence to sustain the story (Weller, 2002: 4).

Yet the story was never corrected before the election. It was subsequently to be probed by two Senate committees, and a compelling overview is provided in Pat Weller's book, *Don't Tell the Prime Minister* (2002). We can draw on Weller to isolate the elements of what might be called an operating template. His deconstruction of events directs us to the mindset of the public service, the habits of ministerial staff, the modes of communication between top-level decision-makers, and the culture of Howard's ministers.

Within the public service, those officers close to events, who knew what had happened, put their faith in the chain of command correctly to advise the government. Surely the tradition of 'frank and fearless' advice would see things right? Yet substantial change in dealings with and terms of appointment of senior public servants by the Howard government have encouraged changes in traditional practice. The top mandarins are kept in uncertainty, encouraged to be 'too responsive, too concerned to show they are on board, too concerned with political protection' (Weller, 2002: 68). In the end:

The question is whether they were so concerned to serve the government of the day...that the urge to serve overpowered the need to be critical...[Some]...reveal a mindset so determined to find evidence to corroborate the story that they glossed over the evidence pointing the other way. (Weller, 2002: 69)

Ministerial staff played a crucial role. They acted in their minister's name. They were the conduits for all information: informing them was regarded as equivalent to informing their minister. They were protected from parliamentary inquiry. With respect to the prime minister, they are highly protective: 'there are things, they will believe, that he is better off not knowing—particularly if the new data contradicts a stand already taken in public' (Weller, 2002: 71). They have become

the "junk-yard attack dogs" of the political system: the hard men and the hit men. They are politically dispensable, convenient scapegoats who will take the bullet for their ministers and protect them from political fallout. (Weller 2002: 72)

It is here that the issue of who told what to whom becomes impossible to detect: 'if they were told, did they pass it on or did they decide it was preferable that the minister should not know so that it could be plausibly denied?' (Weller, 2002: 73).

Ministerial staff were the key to communications. They attempted to limit all information 'to that which had the prescribed political spin' (Weller, 2002: 84). There were (and probably were intended to be) no paper trails. Phone calls, emails, voicemail messages were integral to the unfolding story: most were lost.

As for the ministers and the prime minister, they simply reiterated 'we acted on advice'. 'But it was convenient not to press too hard, not to raise the issue again, and not to ask the hard questions: the convenience of deniability' (Weller, 2002: 95).

The prime minister tells us that he did not know that the story was untrue. But he was surrounded by those who knew, or should have known, that there were

doubts ... He later said he would ask for checks to be made. If they were, he insists he was never told the outcome. The advisers never told him and he never pressed them ... How do we read this situation? A canny controlling prime minister not told about a story that covered the front pages? ... Or could it be a machine working at its best, a machine designed to protect and promote the government? ... No one wants the prime minister to have to correct himself during an election campaign ... So the prime minister is protected by his ministers, his office and his department. Pleading a lack of clear advice, emphasising the uncertainty, they pass on nothing. 'Don't tell the prime minister' must be the prevailing rule. (Weller, 2002: 101-2).

Forlornly, Weller concludes:

... for a month the Australian people were not told they had been misled ... There are many excuses but few reasons. We need an acceptance of accountability somewhere in the system ... If the system failed, we need someone who takes responsibility. If this is a system that was working as participants believed it should, the rest of us should be worried. (Weller, 2002: 101).

The emergence, in August 2004, of Mike Scrafton—defence liaison staffer in Reith's office in late 2001—who asserts that he told the prime minister directly that the children overboard story was untrue prior to the 2001 election, an account Howard contests, underscores the possibility of intentional deceit.

Can all this be discounted as opportunism gone wrong in the heat of an election campaign? Certainly the Senate Select Committee (2002) saw deeper problems: it drew serious lessons from the incident about the need for control and accountability of ministerial staff. Weller and Michael Keating have gone on to elaborate on what those lessons mean for the public service (Tiernan and Weller, 2003; Keating 2003b). And the instances cited at the outset of this paper, from May and June 2004, suggest that the dynamics of the children overboard affair have become a point of reference for the

public and the media. Indeed, repetition of the operating template described above can be discerned in later events.

Why we went to war

We do not yet know accurately what went on in Howard's office or within his cabinet concerning the decision to join the American-led war in Iraq. We do have his own speeches on the case for war from early 2003 (cited in Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD 2004: 87, note 1)—all at that time predicated on the threat posed by WMD, a number of interesting polemics on why the war was wrong (Broinowski, 2003; Gaita, 2003), and a vigorous debate about the government's use of intelligence in justifying the Australian participation. It is in this last realm that familiar patterns seem most evident and, again, in the report of a parliamentary committee (Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD, 2004) and a government initiated inquiry (Flood, 2004) that the most useful evidence can be found.

By mid 2003, growing scepticism in the US and the UK about the quality of intelligence reports underlying the Iraq engagement was having ramifications for Howard in Australia. His constant response was that 'no one in the government was told that evidence was seriously flawed'. Yet there were suggestions—some provoked by the resignation of an intelligence officer, Andrew Wilkie, from ONA who then attacked the government's decision-making—that Howard's office had put its own spin on intelligence assessments. The Senate referred the question of the nature and uses of intelligence on Iraq to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD on June 18, 2003: it reported on March 1, 2004.

Appearing before the committee, Wilkie asserted that the government 'skewed, misrepresented, used selectively and fabricated' intelligence, resorted to exaggeration 'so great it was clear dishonesty', and suggested that words qualifying and tempering intelligence assessments were frequently dropped. He sheeted the blame for distortion home directly to the prime minister's office, and alleged prime minister Howard and

his foreign minister, Alexander Downer, were the local 'cheerleaders' of the invasion campaign. Howard vigorously denied these claims as 'slander', repeating that his government's arguments were 'consistent with the intelligence assessments we received'.

The committee apparently did not accept Wilkie's claims at face value: indeed, it found that Howard's articulation of the case for war was 'more moderate and more measured' than that advanced by George Bush and Tony Blair. Yet in contrasting Howard's case with the evidence (Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD 2004, chapter 5), it emerges that:

- US and UK intelligence assessments were inaccurate and mostly from untested sources—Australia's key analytical agencies tended to be more cautious about the evidence.
- The case that the government made was that Iraq possessed WMD in large quantities and posed a grave and unacceptable threat. 'This is not the picture that emerges from an examination of all the assessments provided to the Committee by Australia's two analytical agencies'.
- Where it suited them, Howard's ministers drew on evidence that best suited their purposes: they simplified and misquoted reports from UNSCOM, UNMOVIC, IAEA and the IISS (see pp. 96-97), and 'the statements from the Prime Minister and Ministers are more strongly worded than most of the AIC (Australian intelligence community) judgements. This is ... because they quote directly from the findings of the British and American intelligence agencies' (p. 94);
- 'ONA agreed that these judgments ... were not necessarily ones that they might have made, but ... as they were made on the basis of material ONA had not seen, the quotations in the speeches were not questioned. They were considered accurate quotations, in the sense of transcriptions, from the British and US documents' (p. 94);

- While 'it is impossible for the Committee to judge how independent from undue external influence the [Australian intelligence] agencies were in relation to their assessments', and accepting that there was no evidence of overt pressure from government, the committee noted that until September 13, 2002, when the US made public its expectation that Australia would join a pre-emptive strike, the ONA had shared the DIO's doubts about Iraq's WMD capacities. On September 13, however, the ONA adopted a much more robust stance: 'It ... was more ready to extrapolate a threatening scenario from historical experience, more ready to accept the new and mostly untested intelligence ... It is so sudden a change in judgment that it appears ONA, at least subconsciously, might have been responding to "policy running strong"'.

With respect to ONA's capitulation, one is reminded again of Weller's comment: 'the urge to serve overpowered the need to be critical ... [resulting in] a mindset so determined to find evidence to corroborate the story that they glossed over evidence pointing the other way'.

The subsequent report of Phillip Flood's inquiry into Australian intelligence (Flood, 2004) has been read as tempering the Joint Committee report—indeed the government insisted that Flood cleared it of the accusations implied in such points as those above. While Flood explicitly denied that there was evidence that the government had put political pressure on the intelligence community to produce assessment that suited its agenda, he confirmed the relative caution of Australian assessments, the disparity between the views of the DIO and the ONA and something of the puzzle about why ONA had switched to supporting the evidence for WMD (which he attributed to its being under-resourced and over-reliant on overseas agencies whose assessments had already been shown to be flawed). The ONA, as a result, he said, was more exposed. The Flood report, however, begs the question that Weller identified, of a culture that induces compliance without explicit demands having to be articulated. Indeed, in pointing to the absence a 'a rigorous culture of challenge', Flood points towards one of the indicators of 'groupthink' (which was to be explicitly acknowledged in both the

US Senate inquiry into intelligence and the Butler inquiry into British intelligence)—a matter to which I return below. More importantly, in identifying the shortcomings of the evidence (it was ‘thin, ambiguous and incomplete’) and in insisting that intelligence is merely the start of the decision-chain (it leads in turn to policy advice and thence to government decisions), Flood may have cleared the intelligence community of responsibility for the decisions taken, but does nothing to dissuade us that Howard and Downer were intent on cherry-picking those aspects of the reports reaching them that best suited a preordained objective.

In case public servants, however, were so incautious as to diverge from the official mindset, Howard’s office was not averse to taking direct action, as was evident in its vigorous intervention against the expressed opinion of Australian Federal Police Commissioner, Mick Keelty, in March 2003. Keelty’s sin was to speak of the likely increase in the terrorist threat to Australia as a result of its participation in the Iraq war—a view the government refused to acknowledge. The willingness of Howard and his ministers publicly to rebuke a senior professional officer and to induce the issue of a ‘clarification’ in his name (that had apparently been drafted within PM & C) was remarkable. While it did not match the attempt to shred Mike Scafton’s credibility once he spoke out on the children overboard affair in August 2004, the lessons for senior public servants could hardly have been more starkly underlined.

On the defensive—again

Another case in which ‘plausible deniability’ was the central component emerged in the furore ignited by the revelations of prisoner abuse by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Until June 1, 2004, there was general denial that Australian authorities had known anything before January, when CNN first reported the matter. As to the seriousness of the offences, the prime minister and the secretary of the defence department said they had been made aware in April. As it became evident that the ICRC, however, had circulated reports on the mistreatment of prisoners in October and November, 2003, and newspapers disclosed that an Australian military officer,

Major George O’Kane, had been working with coalition legal teams in Baghdad on prisoner treatment and was in contact with the ICRC at that time, this position came under scrutiny. In late May it was taken up in the questioning of departmental officials in a Senate Estimates Committee.

The chief of the defence force, General Peter Cosgrove, and the secretary of the department of defence, Ric Smith, released a statement on Friday, May 28, intended to defuse the issue. O’Kane, they said, ‘heard about the seriousness of the issue about the same time as CNN media reporting in late January (2004)’. They acknowledged that O’Kane had worked on a response to the October 2003 ICRC report, but averred that this report ‘raised general concerns about detainee conditions and treatment, but no abuse’. Subsequently, when pressed on this issue, the prime minister repeated the substance of the defence chiefs’ statement, saying, ‘I’ve got nothing to hide’, but reiterating that he was relying on advice from defence.

During a further day of questioning by the senate committee, Cosgrove and Smith revealed no change in their position, but the following day, Tuesday, June 1—having been summoned by the prime minister early that morning to explain the increasing contradictions uncovered by opposition senators and the press—the story collapsed. Defence secretary Smith conceded that the statement issued on Friday was wrong: not only had O’Kane brought the ICRC working papers of late 2003 back to the department, but also other Australian defence liaison officers with the coalition had seen these documents. O’Kane had reported on his return to Australia in February. ‘We do acknowledge’, said Smith, ‘that the allegations (in the ICRC reports) ... were allegations of mistreatment, serious by any standard’. It appears that this information simply was not passed on to the department’s senior officers. In an apology to the committee, Smith and Cosgrove accepted responsibility for giving senior ministers incorrect information over Australian knowledge of the abuse of prisoners.

Within half an hour, Howard appeared at a press conference, where he said that all of his statements had been based on advice from the defence department. He could not be accused of misleading the Australian public:

I am very unhappy that I was misinformed by the Defence Department ... But bear in mind that the chief of the Defence Force and the secretary of the Defence Department were equally poorly served by the advice they received by (*sic*) the department ... I would have done the right thing ... If I'd known about it I would have expressed my concern, of course I would. (*ABC News*, June 1, 2004)

In a cogent immediate response, Michelle Grattan insisted that only disclosures by the press and in the senate committee had brought the truth to light. 'If it had been left to the PM, we'd never have found out'.

If there is one message from what's happened, it is that when this Government is in a jam, it volunteers little except under duress ... Howard says he's 'very unhappy' he was misinformed. But it was absolutely his fault. He made little effort to find out ... It is possible the advice system is as bad as the PM suggests. On precedent, it is also possible that it was convenient for him not to probe too much. The issue might have gone away. Once again bureaucrats and the military have taken the rap for the politicians ... It was clear [from his statement] at the weekend that Howard was making sure he had 'deniability' if he needed it. (Michelle Grattan, *The Age*, June 2, 2004).

Not surprisingly, Labor parliamentarians were more direct. Howard's alleged litany of lies was to become a feature of ALP campaigning up until the 2004 election.

The sequence of events described here led to the unprecedented issue of a public call for truth in government from 43 former senior military officers and diplomats (July 22, 2004). The government vigorously denounced them as yesterday's men, 'doddering daiquiri diplomats' in the words of one minister. It is testimony to the power of the orthodoxies Howard has established, and the complicity of much of the media in them, that this historically unparalleled outburst gained relatively little traction. Yet the important point being made was that precisely in ignoring long-established

conventions and obscuring the probity of government, Howard was destroying trust and 'Without that trust, the democratic structure of our society will be undermined and with it our standing and influence in the world'.

So we come full circle. Is it a mistake to see equivalences in a hasty decision made at the inception of a campaign (the 'children overboard' story), a major policy process (the building of the case for war in Iraq), and departmental dysfunction leading to incorrect advice (and hence Howard's 'inadvertent' deception of the public over Australian knowledge of prisoner mistreatment)? I argue that, despite their differences in scale and importance, these events manifested significant continuities and repetitions. And, as Oscar Wilde might have said, the resort to 'I did not know', 'I was not told', and 'I am not responsible' once might be accidental, twice is unfortunate, three times is reprehensible.

Transitional politics?

My purpose here is not to accuse the government of lying, but to identify what it is that explains its characteristic modes of handling information as it reaches decisions and communicates what it is about. What we have seen are the government's propensities for:

- high risk behaviour (in its willingness to act on sketchy knowledge and then to gamble that such inconvenient facts as do arise will remain unknown);
- ruthlessly selective utilization of knowledge (not only in relation to what it will 'hear' but also in how it communicates);
- adopting a tactic of 'plausible deniability' as a recurrent defence;
- encouraging concurrence seeking (and the suppression of contrary evidence) among senior officials; and
- deploying partisan advisers not to maximise and diversify advice but to filter, sieve and ensure that information, both in and out, has the appropriate spin (and, at the extreme, to be the 'attack dogs' for the policy preferences of the day).

In part, these outcomes are driven by the prime minister's personality and leadership style—to which I'll return. But, perhaps more important, such approaches have been impelled by institutional transitions that have undermined the entities and conventions that served to constrain leadership caprice. Thus, prime ministers will go too far, with actions that recklessly engender cynicism (and undermine confidence in democratic institutions); with tactics that create a vacuum where accountability should be; with practices that deny transparency (and impede citizen attempts to evaluate decision processes); and, finally, with a mindset that engenders bad decisions.

Liberal democracy is characterised by the balancing and sharing of power, designed in theory to prevent the dominance of overweening individuals and collusive groups. Quite apart from well-understood formal institutions (commitment to human rights, constitutional separation of powers, and the like), there is a range of conventions underlying political practice that have similar purposes. The need to win power through parties—entailing negotiation and the acknowledgment of shared beliefs—is part of this. In Westminster systems, the reliance on collective (cabinet) authority rather than prime ministerial power; the distinction between partisan objectives and public service advice; the system of accountability, vested in ministerial responsibility, all contribute to the same end. A polity that does not embody such constraints is liable to be one in which leadership excess can flourish (see Glad, 2002). Neither Australia nor other Westminster polities have yet reached this pass. My argument, however, is that the patterns seen above are indicative of transitional politics in a context of change in *party politics*, *prime ministerial dominance*, and *public service neutrality*.

Party Politics

There is an extensive literature on parties and party change in western democracies. Of interest here are the changes in the post war period, when mass parties (with clear programmatic ideologies and an extensive membership) changed to catch-all parties (attempting to net a broad constituency by matching policy to public mood) and

thence to electoral - professional parties (relying on communications professionals and expert advisers rather than party activists) and perhaps to cartel parties ('part of the state apparatus itself'). (Jaensch, 1994; Marsh, 1995; Marsh, 2004; Ward, 1991; Katz and Mair, 1995). While there is contest over the extent to which such descriptions apply (see, for instance, Goot, 2003), there is agreement on core elements.

- The importance of mass membership, branch mobilization and reliance on party activists has declined.
- Party machines have become professional: trained bureaucrats and policy experts have supplanted former party interactions.
- The need to reach a broad audience directly through new media (rather than through party branches) has drawn communications professionals and 'spin doctors' to the centre.
- The appeal to a diverse, heterogeneous audience (rather than to shared beliefs) has encouraged issue-oriented and personality-driven campaigns, accentuating 'the leader'.
- High-cost mass media techniques and extensive party bureaucracies cannot be sustained by donations and member-fees: mainstream corporate and organizational support has to be solicited, and messages thus have to be tailored to win and to maintain that support.
- Arguably, the major parties become 'cartel parties', agents of the state limiting their objectives to arguments over 'efficient and effective management', and reliant on 'subventions and other benefits from the state', while organizing the system to deny those benefits to challengers (Katz and Mair, 1995; and see Goot, 2003).

What is undeniable is that the dominant parties are capital intensive, professional, centralized and dependent on the projection of leader effectiveness. The networks of advice and support, capital generation and communication centre on the leader rather than the party at large: this gives the leader a licence and impact unmatched in former party structures. Indeed, the leader can transform party philosophy and approach, as—in Australia—Bob Hawke and Paul Keating did with the ALP (see, for instance,

Kelly, 1992; Battin, 2004; Day, 2003; Scott, 2000), and as Howard has done with the Liberal Party (Brett, 2003; Curran, 2004; Rundle, 2001; Walter, 2004).

Prime ministerial dominance

Party transitions have been complemented by changes in the role of the prime minister. Ian McAllister, reviewing the state of play, remarks that 'prime ministers and opposition leaders have replaced many of the roles historically played by political parties in ensuring the efficient operation of the parliamentary system' (McAllister, 2004: 2). Weaker voter attachments enhance the role of the leader. With partisan de-alignment, party leaders 'stand in' for parties in representing issues, integrating interests and mobilizing opinion. As parties of mass organization with local branches have declined, voter attention has shifted from the local to the national stage, with parties shifting their emphasis from local to national leaders in parallel. There is less focus on policy, and more on the personality of the leader. Leadership effects on voting outcomes are now widely recognized.

In government, the complexity of modern decision-making has shifted the emphasis towards charisma, authority and decision and away from collegial consensus: the prime minister has thus become far more than the 'first among equals'. With the declining influence of party structures, the prime minister's power over political careers (and hence as the driver of party discipline and object of loyalty) has been much enhanced. The prime minister has become 'central in how responsible government operates; he or she may choose to include or exclude particular actions under the doctrine, thereby determining [a] minister's fate ... [T]he prime minister, rather than the parliament ... determines how the doctrine is implemented' (McAllister, 2004: 5). Arguably, globalisation plays a part: 'parliamentary systems are becoming more presidential in character, style and operation, as the environments in which they operate become more uniform' (McAllister, 2004: 8; and see Marsh, 2003). The trends traced by McAllister all point towards a centralization of power in the prime minister, 'but the change is gradual and in some cases outweighed by the

personalities involved ... In short, the personality of the leader is greater than the strength of the trend' (McAllister, 2004: 26). This, again, is a point to which I will return.

Public service neutrality

There has always been argument within Westminster democracies over the supposed separation of politics from administration and the capacity for 'frank and fearless' advice from a reasonably impartial public service. In Australia, a reasonable case can be made that the federal bureaucracy complemented the parties in a post-war policy project that responded to what the electorate demanded: relatively equal life chances (Brown, 1995; Encel, 1970; Walter, 1999). Ministers were told not only what they wanted to know but also what they needed to know. There is little doubt that the public service within Westminster polities has become more compliant of late, and in the Australian case, more politicised. Weller (2002), as we have seen, bases a great deal of his argument concerning dysfunction in the 'children overboard' affair on the complicity of senior public servants—a pattern repeated in the other incidents reviewed above.

Reforms to the Australian public service, intended to make its leadership more responsive to the government of the day, began under Labor governments in the 1970s and 1980s. Whitlam (ALP, 1972-1975) introduced expanded ministerial staff (Walter, 1986). Under Hawke (ALP, 1983-1991), a key measure was the shift of career public servants at the top levels to contract appointments (Keating, 2003a). Howard, since 1996, has simply continued where Labor governments began. But that departmental secretaries now serve at their minister's pleasure was signalled by the sacking of a number immediately upon Howard's assumption of office, and a later controversial dismissal of (and unsuccessful legal appeal by) a well-regarded career officer who was effective, but not to his minister's liking. The perception that public - spirited career civil servants have been replaced by political appointees is inevitable. That such quasi-autonomous figures as AFP Commissioner Keelty can be subject to overt pressure to

comply simply accentuates such perceptions. And while it would be naive to expect the government to accept without challenge the attempt of a former public servant, Mike Scrafton, to 'set the record straight', the nature of its response underlined the very bullying and intimidation to which Scrafton attested.

When the authors of public sector reform themselves begin to express concerns, as does a former secretary of PM & C and advocate of reform, Michael Keating (2003a; 2003b: 94), it is time to wonder whether 'responsiveness' has mutated into the sort of 'politicisation' that impedes both the transmission of unwelcome advice and the ability of public servants to ensure due process—and the integrity of the system.

The picture is further clouded by the increasing augmentation of partisan ministerial staff. Originally introduced to maximise sources of advice, to provide alternative options and critical dissent rather than to impose concurrence - seeking behaviour (see Walter, 1986), ministerial staff have come to have the opposite effect, as we see above. Their ability to intervene in departmental processes; to mediate between the political and administrative domains; to drive, sieve and skew advice; to insist upon what the minister wants as opposed to the public interest or the integrity of government has amplified concern about public sector reform. It has provoked not only extensive review of ministerial staff (Holland, 2002) and calls for accountability measures (Holland, 2002; Keating, 2003b; Weller, 2002; Tiernan & Weller, 2003), but also a reconsideration of and demand for greater security of tenure and strengthening of the independence of departmental secretaries to act as a counterweight (Keating, 2003b). The Howard government has not heeded these calls, but the ALP made reform of the machinery of government an element in its 2004 campaign.

In summary, the conventions of political practice—in the traditional party democracy—might once have facilitated reasonably robust policy decisions. While no government would perfectly have met the pattern of broad expectations, these expectations pushed behaviour in certain ways. The need to connect a personal agenda with a broad

philosophy, to carry party followers with you by negotiated support (through, for instance, party forums) and by showing how current action connects with common goals, was one form of check on leadership caprice. The tradition of collective authority and ministerial responsibility promoted debate, consensus and accountability. The separation of politics and administration and the belief in the function of the public service to deliver disinterested advice with a degree of independence expanded options (there were always partisan sources whose inputs could be weighed alongside those of the public service). All of the above imposed threshold requirements—winning the party, gaining cabinet support, acknowledging responsibility for decisions, balancing competing options from partisan and public service advice—that were an incentive for periodic reality checks and a restraint on leaders. The changes reviewed here have weakened those threshold requirements, giving greater momentum to personalised leadership, while diminishing the incentive for reality checks.

Prime ministerial personality

McAllister notes that the extent to which these institutional transitions bite depends on a leader's personality. What is there to say about Howard's personality and leadership style? In his conduct of politics, Howard has been variously described as 'dogged and determined'; as a 'canny, controlling prime minister'; as having become so dominant in his party 'he can hang on as long as he wants', 'he owns the party'. Rundle's (2001) description of him as a ruthless, pragmatic opportunist, prepared to do whatever it takes, is an element that must be acknowledged. However, it does not capture the fact that he has a consistent vision, or the fantasy of battle that underscores his self-belief: Howard is, above all, self-identified as a Churchillian warrior: 'I am the bloke who ultimately wins the battle, and in political terms that is Churchill'.

Banal as this may seem, Judith Brett has shown how Howard, scorning the intelligentsia, determinedly committed to plain speaking, has fashioned an enormously powerful message that professes to speak for the 'ordinary battler', and to

advance the interests of 'the mainstream' and a common heritage against vested interests ('elites'), internal division, international challenge and foreign hostility (Brett, 2003). Brett, no apologist for the right, argues persuasively that he is the most creative conservative political leader since Menzies.

Notice, however, that Howard—who came to power arguing that he would create the conditions where people could feel 'comfortable and relaxed'—was a fighter from the first: driving liberal 'wets' from his party (and expunging its Deakinite social - liberal heritage); overthrowing the top echelons of the public service; turning the debate about national identity into a notoriously combative 'history war' (see Macintyre and Clark, 2003); sweeping Labor appointees on public authorities aside; questioning the motives of leaders of the 'Aboriginal industry'; insisting on the unity of the common culture against multicultural incursions; and taking the battle to those 'elites' who, he said, stood in the way of social progress. He was the natural leader, then, to prosper from the 'securitisation' agenda provoked, first, as illegal immigration was construed as an attack on national sovereignty, then immensely amplified by the September 11 attacks (Howard was in Washington at the time), the 'war on terror' and the Iraq invasion. He was, in effect, a crisis leader who began to identify threats, articulate the need to fight, institute tribal divisions between 'them' and 'us' and rally 'the troops' well before international events accentuated the negatives. When they did, as McKenna argues, his natural propensities could be fused with the need for combat leadership, and Howard emerged as the 'wartime' leader that had, as McKenna shows, been his fantasy ideal.

Howard's religious zeal for Anzac is unique. In no other sphere of Australian culture or politics does he betray the same depth of feeling or employ such pious language ... For John Howard, it is through the memory of war, and his personal leadership of military engagement as prime minister, that the nation finds its most meaningful expression ... With Howard's political supremacy has come considerable hubris and much greater symbolic power invested in the office of prime minister. (McKenna, 2003: 196-197).

We know this sort of leader: hard working, driven, controlling and moralistic. Analysts like Barber (1972, on 'active-negative' leaders) and Little (1988) have shown the underlying psychological constellation and how it fuses with political style: these are the compulsives, given to work and worry, inclined to dominate through moralistic rhetoric, externalising anger and hostility onto selected enemies, prone to rigid world views, refusing compromise or surrender as an admission of weakness, insisting on realism and decisive action. Their approach has entailments: energy is harnessed to overcoming obstacles—nature, human opponents or a pervasive if unnamed crisis—'all achievement is against the grain' (Little, 1988); society is conceived as structure, to be defended against dissent; there is ready resort to manipulation—if you are in the right, what does it matter what methods are used? Preoccupied with adversary politics and warring tribes, the leader's message is yet one of unity in the face of those who would divide us. In Barber's (1972) terms, the active-negative leader transforms policy problems 'from a matter of calculation of results to a matter of emotional loyalty to ideals... [His] view of reality must be accepted else the cause fall apart'. And Little (1988) adds, 'A good deal of moralizing is used against the foot-soldier who dares to put initiative against sheer obedience; initiative is for higher ranks, like big crimes'.

Barber and Little, writing long before Howard's ascension, capture the essence of his style in their typologies. Further, it seems to me arguable that there is a confluence here between Howard's own attributes and a series of institutional changes that provided a context in which his style of leadership could flourish; this is what was manifested in those modes of government action discussed earlier. This brings me back to McAllister's point: the incipient trend towards enhanced prime ministerial power can be ameliorated or augmented by a leader's personality. Howard, the 'bloke who wins the battle', has significantly accelerated the trend. And the 'securitisation' of politics attendant on border protection, the Iraq invasion and the 'war on terror' has been an additional accelerant. Do both presage the renaissance of groupthink?

Groupthink: the indicators

Irving Janis's theory of groupthink (1972, 1982, 1989) is one of the most widely cited models of political decision - making ever produced. It is also hotly contested (Aldag and Fuller, 1993; Turner and Pratkanis, 1998). It is widely noted, however, that it continues to recur because 'the intuitive appeal of the groupthink concept and the seductiveness of its formulation...overwhelm[s] the scientific evidence on the topic' (Turner and Pratkanis, 1998: 112). How, indeed, could one replicate, say, the complexity of children overboard and the government response, in a laboratory setting? Apart from 'the intuitive appeal' of groupthink in analysing the cases I've discussed though, I am also guided by methodical attempts to tie the elements of groupthink more closely to organisational theory and to the nexus between political and bureaucratic decision - making (Preston and 't Hart, 1999).

Janis's view was that high cohesiveness and a concurrence seeking tendency that interferes with critical thinking are the central features of groupthink (Janis, 1982: 9). Note that the active-negative leader, according to Barber (1972), is 'likely either to encourage members directly towards groupthink or to instil in them a fear of recrimination that deters critical thinking just as effectively' (Elms, 1976: 154), and reflect on the serial failures of senior public servants to tell Howard and his ministers when they were wrong, and their search against the odds to find evidence to support the government's story. Even critics suggest that the variable that has most consistent support is directive leadership: '...almost by definition, leader behaviors that promote the leader's own views and do not allow open exploration of alternatives will be associated with groupthink defects such as incomplete survey of alternatives and failure to reexamine preferred and rejected alternatives' (Aldag and Fuller, 1993: 539). Note, then, the failure of critical thinking in relation to the promulgation of the children overboard story; or the directive leadership (Howard and Downer as 'cheerleaders') and the refusal to consider alternatives in the selective utilisation of intelligence assessments, as the case for war with Iraq was considered.

We can touch on other indicators: the drive for quick and painless unanimity on issues the group has to confront (ONA's capitulation on intelligence assessments when 'policy was running strongly?'); the suppression of personal doubts (the belief among officers on the ground that the 'chain of command' would rectify mistakes, while their seniors used the fact that they had not been at the scene as an excuse not to confront issues); the belief in the inherent morality of the group (Howard, 'I believed what I was told, and we are all honourable men'); the perverse impact of 'mindguards' (ministerial advisers as the 'attack dogs' of current orthodoxies); and a view of opponents as evil. 'The results,' says 't Hart, 'are devastating: a distorted view of reality ... hasty and reckless policies, and a neglect of ethical issues' ('t Hart, 1991: 247).

Conclusion

The nexus in all of this is the relation between a leader and his/her advisory group. Much of the research on bureaucratic/political decision-making indicates 'the benefits of duplication, overlap and competition' (Preston and 't Hart, 1999: 51) in producing a variety of possible options for consideration and preventing hasty closure and the false consensus of groupthink. Institutional and political practices in Westminster party political systems arguably once served to constrain the groupthink dynamic. The recent trend towards prime ministerial predominance has reduced the influence of competition (within cabinet, between party forums and party leadership, between partisans and public service advisers, between senior public servants and ministerial staff). The imperative for recurrent reality checks has been diminished. A leader whose own proclivities enhance the funnelling effect of more centralisation, tight inner circles, closed systems and personal policy control may be especially prone to risky decisions: decisions characterised by 'oversimplification, isolationism and haste' (Preston and 't Hart, 1999: 69). Conscious of such outcomes as being inherently vulnerable to scrutiny, the inner circle will then resort to ethically dubious measures to control information—as in each of the cases discussed above.

In this transitional context, a leader can capitalise on emerging trends and play by new rules, but the political ethos remains governed by assumptions inherent to Westminster systems: against these standards, such a leader may be seen to have gone too far. Whether specific accusations, such as those quoted at the beginning of this paper, or the more general cynicism and disillusion that have been found to be pervasive in the electorate (Pusey, 2003; Saunders, 2002) will see Howard defeated in 2004 remains a moot point. He exemplifies a more general problem, and one inducing voters to feel genuine perplexity—because of the transitional context—about whether *any* alternative leader will behave differently. Latham has yet to convince us on this score. The issue, finally, is whether the transitional politics I have described are inherently conducive to groupthink, especially in the realm of foreign policy and security decisions (since these are most fundamental to national well being and the least amenable to broad, plural, representative interests). If so, the question is not whether Howard goes too far, but rather, what can we learn from this case about the circumstances in which prime ministers will go too far? In short, how can decision-making practices and institutional reform be adjusted to produce better decisions and to safeguard the qualities of integrity and accountability on which a democratic ethos relies?

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