Issue Management and the Australian Gun Debate

a review of the media salience and issue management following the Tasmanian massacre of 1996.

by

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Abstract:

On April 29, 1996, Martin Bryant shot and killed 35 people and injured 13 others with an automatic rifle at Port Arthur in Tasmania. While there was immediate national disgust to this crime and tragedy, media attention quickly move to focus on the issues of gun control and political conflict. As these three issues remained interrelated and as images and messages were manufactured and maneuvered into the media to suit both private and public agendas, the Australia gun debate became a masterful exercise in issue management.

This study examines the rise and fall of media coverage of the issues for May, 1996, to demonstrate the salience of the issues on the public agenda. At the same time, the study seeks to reveal something of the issue management process that occurred and the hidden agendas that motivated the political and media activity.

The study serves to demonstrate the role of the media in the creation of issue salience and the importance of the issue management function to both business and politics.

Introduction.

In the early afternoon of Sunday, April 28, 1996, a lone gunman entered a cafe at Port Arthur in Tasmania and began shooting indiscriminately. That afternoon, Martin Bryant killed 35 people and injured a further 13 using an automatic rifle. The massacre shocked the nation. While there was immediate reaction to Bryant and disgust at his crime, attention quickly moved to the issue of gun control. (1)

The Australian gun debate of 1996 stands as a masterful example of issue management. The media reported on the massacre, the confrontation of opposing factions and opinions on gun control, and the political campaign to enact gun control legislation in all States. Over several months, as public attention moved from the massacre to gun control, the media informed, shocked and disgusted its national audience as the issues unfolded. Messages and images were manufactured and maneuvered into the media by various stakeholders in order to influence public opinion and persuade decision makers. As the issues became politically complicated, the salience and attention given by the media mirrored the priority of those issues on the public agenda.

While the issues of gun control and political conflict grew in salience, the Tasmanian massacre continued to receive attention and remained interrelated with the other issues for some months. The salience of the issues can be measured through the amount of media attention they received but the management of the issues, as is usually the case, remained for the most part unseen. This study seeks to demonstrate firstly the interrelationship between the three issues on the public agenda during May, 1996. It also seeks to reveal some of the issue management that occurred and the hidden agendas that motivated the political and media activity.

This research involved surveying two Australian newspapers, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Gold Coast Bulletin, over the month of May, 1996, to track the reportage of three issues: the Tasmanian massacre and the arrest of Martin Bryant; the debate over gun control; and the political conflict and issue management campaign that

followed. The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) is a major city daily with a national readership and covers national issues. The Gold Coast Bulletin (GCB) is the only major daily paper printed on the Gold Coast in South East Queensland but tends to take a local focus on the issues and news it covers. A comparison between the two papers was undertaken because of the difference in the nature of the publications and because the two papers use the same type face and line spacing in their layout, making the comparison of coverage possible.

The results of the survey and the examination of the motives and management behind the issues, reveal both the political complexity of such public issues and the role of the media in the public agenda management process. The study serves to demonstrate the role of the media in creating issue salience but also the very existence of the issue management function in business and politics.

The American public relations consultant, Howard Chase first coined the phrase 'issue management' in the mid-1970s to identify a specialized corporate function. He was to later define the term as; "... the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate, and direct all strategic and policy planning functions, and all public affairs and public relations skills toward achievement of one objective: meaningful participation in the creation of public policy that effects personal and institutional destiny." (2) Since Chase introduced the concept, however, issue management has moved beyond public policy creation to incorporate the management of public opinion and persuasion. The natural competitiveness of politics and business has made it the breading ground for the issue management function. The objective, however, is no longer 'meaningful participation' but 'organized persuasion'. Accordingly, public opinion itself can be used as a tool in business and politics to bring pressure to bear upon a target audience in the persuasion process. It is suggested here that this process of using the media and public opinion to influence decision makes is evident from this study.

Studies of agenda setting and issue management have revealed in Australia (3) and overseas (4) how issues rise and fall on the public agenda as new developments occur and as the media give them attention. The gun control debate demonstrates how the media played a role in interpreting and relating events to the issues at hand. At the

same time, while the media heavily influence the salience of public issues, they are themselves subject to the ever changing mosaic of issues that interest the public at any given time. John Solaski points out; "... public issues do not exist independently of one another." (5) and the gun debate supports this argument. Indeed, the involvement of so many stakeholders and issue mangers make the gun debate an important expose of the dynamics and interplay of the politics, the media and interest groups in a modern democracy.

The Nature of the Issue.

While gun laws were a State Government responsibility, the passion of the nation for something to be done in response to the killings motivated Prime Minister, John Howard, to call for national laws and uniform national restrictions on automatic and semi-automatic weapons. Gun control was, after all, an issue Howard felt personally passionate about. (6) Passions, however, soon gave way to political realities. Opinion surveys showed that 85% of people supported gun control. (7) At the same time, 15% of the national audience were gun ownership supporters. The problem was that the vast majority of this 15% group were right wing politically conservative voters who normally supported the National-Liberal Party Coalition.

Along with control of the Federal Government, the Coalition Parties held 5 of the 6 State Governments. The irony was that the one State held by a Labour Government gave immediate support to Howard's plan for national gun control while the Coalition State Governments all resisted the proposal. Howard faced opposition from the State Governments as well as from Federal Members in the Coalition because of the support for gun ownership and a highly energized gun lobby.

Howard may have represented the passions of the nation but he faced State Government, Coalition, interest group and then bureaucratic opposition. Police organizations, government departments and Coalition State Governments wanted the status quo to remain and they were prepared to threaten the existence of the Federal

Government to prove it. John Howard may have acted too quickly without counting the cost of his initiatives but, having counted the costs, he may not have acted at all.

In his passion, and in response to increased lobbying of Coalition MPs, Howard threatened to call a snap election to gain a national mandate against his own Coalition. While this threatened the security of many newly elected Members, as well as the Government, and would certainly catch the gun lobby unprepared, it also risked loosing the Federal Senate to the control of a right wing group of social fundamentalists.

While John Howard reacted to the horror of Port Arthur out of personal and social concern, taking a strong stand on the issue had political attraction for Howard because, as a new Prime Minister, it gave him the opportunity to develop his image as a national leader. Gun control, like the other national issues of wood chipping, pollution, and immigration, were always going to divide public opinion. Howard's opportunity was to win the seemingly unwinable while buoyed by overwhelming popular support: He aspired to be a popular hero.

On the other side, the gun lobby, although a collective of unorganized shooters groups and farmers, should have been more prepared for the public opinion backlash. Mass killings in America and Britain as well as Australia signaled that public opinion was not going to tolerate a continuance of lax gun laws. Some years earlier, in 1989, the New South Wales Premier, Barry Unsworth, put his political career on the line after a similar mass killing in a Sydney shopping center. While his focus on one issue proved to be his demise and the loss of Government in a general election, his campaign and personal risk should have signaled to gun organizations the increasing pressure mounting against gun ownership.

In addition to the vying interests and political opinions, the media chose to become involved with its own agenda. Apart from reporting the news and every twist of conflict they could discover, the commercial media in general appeared eager to seek out drama and find ever more novel aspects to the issues. While they had the power to report and give opinions on the issues as they saw them, and as they could portray

them, they were also the victims often of their own enthusiasm as stories were leaked or events staged to influence their coverage. Media activity and reportage gave salience to the issues but the media was also a channel of communication for others to manage the public agenda.

The Port Arthur massacre had ignited the conscience of a nation and brought into play social and political forces powerful enough to divide that same nation. It wasn't just that deep seeded issues had surfaced on the public agenda, or that there was suddenly a crisis for political and gun-owner interest groups. The stakes were so high and the people involved were so many that the campaign to pass anti-gun laws would involve a number of opposing and associated forces in a contest of issue management and public will.

Background to Issue Management.

Public opinion is perhaps more volatile and responsive to issues than ever before. Alvin Toffler believes that the world is in the process of redefining its civilization as developments in information technology and consumer choice create a new paradigms of wealth and power based on information management. Toffler suggests that the public is being 'demassified' (8) to become many varied and overlapping 'publics' formed around interest and choice. This empowering of the 'public' is a shift in the paradigm of social and political power as consumer publics are more able and ready to express their opinions in what they buy or how they vote. In becoming more sensitive to their various 'publics' and the power of public opinion, business and politics are realizing the importance of communications management.

While political organizations have been aware of the growth in marginal voting habits for some time, corporations, too, Heath says, need to be " ... effectively encouraging dialogue between business and other critical sections [of the public and government]. (9) It is in this context of 'dialogue' that the management of issues becomes important. The growing strength of public opinion necessitates that business as well as political

organizations endeavor to manage their issues, as well as their messages and images, clearly and in accord with a communications strategy.

From the beginning of the gun control issue, the gun lobby had an image problem. A lone gunman with an automatic weapon killing people indiscriminately was a horrifying scene. But the image of the gun lobby was worsened as right wing extremists reacted to the suggestion of gun control by threatening resistance to government and public will. From the beginning, Howard was able to cast himself in the role of a public hero taking on all-comers, including Coalition MPs, to bring about change for social good. Accordingly, the gun debate was to become essentially an exercise in image management as much as it was in issue management.

The gun debate demonstrates that the arena for public policy debate has moved out of the legislative chamber and the board room and into the lounge room; literally. Parliaments are now televised as are board meetings and public rallies. Politicians and business people are now in direct communication with their 'publics' whether they want to be or not. It is no longer enough to influence the opinions of other decision makers, politicians and business people have to also address the values of their publics.

The public and private sector are now subject to increasing public demand for responsible action and consideration of public opinion. Indeed, Buchholz suggests that it is this divergence between social values and organizational policy and behavior that creates a public issue in the first place. He says: " Public issues emerge in our society because of the value changes that generate pressures on our institutions by causing a gap between public expectations and institutional performance." (10) The point is that it is not enough for organizations to do good things they must also be perceived to be doing good things.

In the context of a new paradigm and an empowered public, communication and information are the vital ingredients to the socio-commercial matrix. Public opinion, not public policy, is the focus of the communication management endeavor. Issue management and image management are now closely aligned.

<u>Public Agenda.</u>

The public agenda comprises the issues that are currently of interest to the public and is made up of the distribution of various opinions on those issues. (11) Over a period of time, issues rise and fall as they receive attention or as other issues take their place. In the media, however, news focuses on events and only secondarily follows issues. Stories and events by nature have a short news life and for them to become issues, new information and perspectives need to be fed to the media to maintain public interest and attention. Yet, there are many and varied issues that interest the public or 'publics' and frequently, topics get coverage because they already exist as part of the public issues agenda. While the Tasmanian massacre presented the public with new information and created a new issue, it also stimulated the debate on the existing issue of gun control.

The media plays a dual role in this process public agenda creation as it can both create an issue by revealing information previously unknown or it can draw public attention to existing issues by the salience it contributes through headlines, placement, spacing and photos. McCombs suggests that: "Through its patterns of selection and play of the daily news, the press presents the public a continuous stream of cues about the relative importance of various topics and events." (12) This was particularly pertinent to the presentation of material on the gun debate as the media played a major role in issue salience and perhaps even exasperated the conflict in the early stages. The television interviews with right-wing, non-aligned extremists in the first week of the debate is an example of provoking trouble. (13)

Simon Gadir's landmark Australian study on Agenda Setting in 1978 at Macquarie University clearly indicated the relationship between the public agenda and the media agenda. The study surveyed both the media and the opinions of respondents and found that in most cases there was a disparity between the value ascribed to issues by the public and the media. While the survey generally showed that the public gave higher value to issues than did the media, the movement of ascribed value over a period of time was generally in parallel. Gadir says; "Visual patterns of public issue-salience

were substantially different from one issue to another, yet showed sufficient similarity to visual patterns of media coverage of the respective issues so as not to be dismissed as chance occurrence." (14) Gadir concludes that despite the disparity between public and media opinion, over time, public opinion comes to reflect the salience given to issues by the media and thereby demonstrating a clear agenda setting trend. (15)

The nature of the public agenda is such that newspapers and news reporting tend to report on those stories which they sense will interest the public. This may be for the purely commercial reason of selling newspapers or air time, but issues are hard to create and the media's attention to stories is usually because they sense that interest in the issue already exits. While some issues lay dormant waiting for some new initiative to give them rebirth, other issues come on the public agenda first as topics and grow into issues as the media or interest groups give them salience. Accordingly, the media can influence the public agenda by weighting certain issues and in many instances forming, as well as expressing, public opinion. "While the press may not tell us what to think, it is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about." (16)

Strategic Planning.

The gun debate that emerged as a consequence of the Port Arthur massacre, may appear as simply the media reporting events and stories as they occurred. But this is not a realistic appraisal. In the context of a political agenda, the media was used as part of a communications campaign as much as it sought to give salience to issues in its own right. Indeed, the media's insatiable desire to give 'up-to-the-minute' coverage of the issues and conflicts meant that they often focused on the dramatic events and colorful personalities and overlooked the political campaign going on behind the scenes. The media was the means to create images and report the news but is was not necessarily managing the issues.

As the media plays a vital role in the formation of public opinion and, accordingly, in the formation of public policy, it has become important for governments and business to take a greater interest in the management of their communications. While

organizations may wish to maintain order and keep control of their image and reputation, it has become extremely difficult to do so without a strategic plan. Simply stated; "... a strategic plan provides a proactive and disciplined focus of resources and intelligence to achieve a future designated goal." (17)

Once issue management is understood as a management function, it becomes part of an organization's integrated communications and marketing strategy. The Gulf War of 1991 demonstrated clearly how a well planned strategic communications campaign can win the war of public opinion. (18) The media, while having a certain degree of power to influence public opinion, are at the same time vulnerable to the influence of others to present images and issues as they want them presented.

To use the media as a communications channel to the public is common place. Some 70% of news print information is believed to be derived from public relations consultants now (19). In the context of a new 'information age', however, communication management and strategic planning are essential to business and political success. "The management of strategic communications has become increasingly important because information control, image development and the use of persuasion have become so important." (20)

The Bill Clinton Campaign for US President in 1996, demonstrated a shift in the political campaign paradigm (in parallel to the social paradigm shift toward the information age) and the refocus of campaigning away from issue debates and policy proposals to image creation. The war of words in the parliament has given way to a war of smiles on public television. For Clinton, it was all a matter of strategy. If he had wanted to debate the issues and communicate through the press, there is no doubt that the White House could have presented an informative and rigorous argument. But the Clinton team chose to concentrate on the visual media and image projection and, accordingly, use all the communication techniques available to them. The Clinton strategy was to define the issues to suit their own agenda and image. (21) Popular appeal, rather than constituency appeal, and managing the issues by managing the image are intelligent strategies in an age an television. The Clinton Campaign shows

that the management of issues is now firmly associated with the management of images and messages.

The gun debate was won and lost in the lounge rooms of the voting public. As politics has become a matter of public viewing, so, too, the opinions of the viewing public were used as a strategic tool to overcome political opponents. The art of politics has become the art of communication-issues management.

Media Coverage Survey

On Sunday afternoon, April 28, 1996, Martin Bryant shot and killed 35 people in Port Arthur, Tasmania. Broadcast media from across Australia were able to cover the story almost immediately transmitting live on national evening news. All the major newspapers were able to cover the story the following day.

As occurrences were reported in the following weeks, two other issues emerged in addition to the issue of the Port Arthur killings; the public debate over gun control, and the political conflict within the Liberal-National Party Coalition Government.

The purpose of this survey was to track the salience given to the three issues and to demonstrate how issues rise and fall on the media and public agenda. In tracking the salience through media reportage it is not possible to identify the deferential between media and public opinion. Based on the Gadir study, it is to be assumed that their exists a correlation of interest anyway. To further overcome the problem, at least to some degree, two newspapers were chosen from different States and of different format and style in order to gain a co-efficiency and observe a common result.

Method:

The Sydney Morning Herald and the Gold Coast Bulletin were examined for 30 days from April 29, 1996 to May 29, 1996. The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) is a major city daily with an accent on politics, business and world events. The Bulletin, although

a Gold Coast, Queensland, major daily, in a city of some 600,000 people is a tabloid focusing on local issues with secondary coverage of national and international events.

This quantitative survey consisted of simply counting the amount of line space given to each issue in both newspapers on a daily basis. While the papers are different in format, they use the same type face and line width making a direct comparison of the coverage possible. Both papers used photographs to enhance their stories, the SMH more than the Bulletin, but this aspect of the coverage has not been accounted for.

Overview:

Apart from the comparison of the amount of space allotted to the issues, the newspapers tended to run in parallel as they covered the stories of the day and both clearly showed the movement of the issues on the public agenda.

The SMH and the Bulletin showed a similar topic development pattern but utilized distinctly different styles in the vocabulary and message construction. Because the issues were so volatile with new opinions or events unfolding daily, the newspapers actively played a role as communications technicians as well as serving as notice-board for the messages of others in these matters.

The SMH with its focus on the social and political implications of the issues, gave more background on the events of the massacre and in general gave more coverage to the other two issues as well. The Bulletin basically followed the larger city newspapers in its coverage. The SMH, with its larger staff had the ability to capture information quickly and more in depth than the Bulletin and this shows in the nature of the coverage.

In theory, the coverage of news reflects such news values as timeliness, consequence, conflict, and drama. While these values, as well as the opportunities, vary between the SMH and the Bulletin, it is clear in both papers that the public agenda demanded that

the papers cover these issues are regularly as they could. The commercial interest of the papers appear to follow the issue interest of the public.

<u>Research Findings:</u>

<u>i. Comparison of the Coverage of the Port Arthur Massacre.</u>

As a relatively local paper of limited resources, the Gold Coast Bulletin was reliant upon other sources of information to cover the story. Because the massacre occurred on a Sunday while many newspaper staff were off duty, gaining news was that much harder for the Bulletin. Consequently, while the Bulletin had to change its cover page for the Monday print it only reported sparingly on the massacre on its first and second pages. The SMH gave three times as much coverage than the Bulletin on the Monday to this story.

The following day, Tuesday, April 30, the Bulletin was in a better position to pick up on the news as reported by other papers and to increase its sources for fresh news. As a result, it double its reportage to 717 lines, up from 313 lines for the Monday. This was still a long way short of the SMH with 1108 lines devoted to the story for the Tuesday. On the Wednesday, the Bulletin ran 711 lines on the massacre while the SMH slightly decreased to 956.

For the Bulletin, its coverage involved a re-enactment of the events of the Sunday afternoon and a catching up on the events and opinions of three days of intense activity but it remained continually behind the current news. Even as the Bulletin went on sale on the Monday morning, its coverage was dated. For example, the Bulletin reported that; "A gunman who shot 32 people and injured 18 others was held up last night with three hostages." (22) At the time the paper went on sale, broadcast media were reporting on the arrest and the state of the victims. In contrast to the Bulletin, other media had named the accused, Martin Bryant, and had started interviewing people who knew him.

By the Thursday, May 2, the coverage had dropped off for the Bulletin and continued to do so even though the mourning and burials were receiving coverage elsewhere. For that Thursday, the Bulletin gave 267 lines to the story while the SMH gave 1300 lines with large space photographs. By the weekend, the Bulletin coverage had dropped further to 119 lines, while the SMH's sister Sunday paper, the Sun Herald, gave 911 lines to the story.

Both papers gave much coverage to the issue when it began and then steadily declined over the next week but the SMH gave far more extensive coverage to the issue. For the Bulletin, this was not just a problem of the availability of information but a choice to remain local in its content. While the SMH had reported on the funerals on the Thursday, the following Weekend Bulletin gave a memorial service front page coverage but shared the space with a local rain report.

ii. Comparison of the Coverage of the Gun Debate.

From as early as Monday, May 29, the issue of gun control surfaced with the Australian Medical Association calling for an immediate national summit. Other criminologists and opinion leaders joined in as the history of the increased use of automatic weapons in mass murders was discussed. The tragedy had given way to an opportunity to do something about the use and abuse of firearms. But there were many people and organizations with personal and vested interests in keeping liberal laws. Thus the conflict and the debate.

Because the SMH covers national issues, its coverage reflects the salience of the issues in different States as well as on different aspects of the debate. Again, the SMH was the first to give broad coverage to the issue and maintain its initial coverage continually for some three weeks. In comparison, the Bulletin did not give the issue serious coverage until Friday, May 10, the end of the second week, with some 500 lines devoted to the issue. The paper then also followed along with other major papers, and reported the debate for the next two weeks.

The Bulletin trailed in its coverage of the gun debate issue and on several occasions failed entirely to report national events. On Friday, May 3, for example, the Bulletin gave only 47 lines to the gun debate while the SMH gave some 374 lines as the issue first gained precedent over the Port Arthur massacre.

By the second week, the focus had moved away from the massacre and onto the gun debate and the political infighting. Indeed, the graphs of the coverage show the strong interrelationship between these two issues at this time. A movement in one issue appears to effect the movement in the other. This entwined relationship of action and reaction makes the tracking of the salience of these issues on the public agenda of that much more interest.

Over the following weeks and even months, these two issues took on a vitality of their own and some what independent of the salience that the media gave to them. Apart from the media's agenda and even the public agenda, these issues were now firmly part of the public policy agenda of the nation. The media was able to report on most of the activities that occurred but based on the length of time the issues were sustained and the variety of new information and the people involved, it is perhaps fair to say that the media only reflected a degree of the salience the issues had for the public or for public policy.

As the debate developed, the attention moved away from the arguments of gun ownership and on to the polarization of opinions. By the second week, and in the wake of the massacre issue, people had started to consider the consequences, both personal and social, of the proposed gun control laws. Accordingly, media attention moved away from covering the arguments of the debate to those involved in the arguing.

 iii. Comparison of the Coverage of the Political Debate.

On a national level, John Howard was reported as having a personal preference against gun ownership (23) and taking the opportunity to be a national spokesman on the subject, initiated, either knowingly or unknowingly, the political conflict himself. On

Wednesday, May 11, as John Howard made adamant demands of the State Governments to change their laws, the SMH gave 809 lines to the story on the previous days events, the Bulletin, however, gave none. While the information would have been available on the national wires, the Bulletin chose to ignore it.

With a readership predominantly interested in political issues, the SMH gave some coverage of political opinion from the first day, May 29. On this occasion, the Bulletin had no coverage at all of political opinion. Over the month of the survey, the SMH gave consistent coverage of political events and opinions as they occurred. The Bulletin, in comparison with its coverage of the other issues, gave a disproportionate amount of attention to the political issue. At times, it gave more attention to the political conflict than did the SMH. While there are the signs of the Bulletin giving following day reportage as is evident also in the other issues, the Bulletin seems to have habits own agenda in focusing on the political conflict as it effected farmers and gun owners.

An explanation for this is the Bulletin's coverage of the political conflict as a State issue. As a local focused paper, gun ownership appears to have a local interest value, but for Queensland, gun ownership was a major issue for farmers who were concerned with how the State Government was standing up to the demands of Canberra. This perspective and reader interest value was absent from the SMH as a major city daily.

iv. Comparison of the SMH and the Bulletin.

The Bulletin gave a succinct and easily analyzed development of the issues. Generally, it followed the lead of the other major papers and it was obvious that the Bulletin's ability to cover the issues on its own was limited. The SMH, on the other hand, had the ability to present more information and more varied and interrelated information and opinion.

It is clear that the subjects of gun control and political conflict quickly moved to issue status as the papers endeavored to keep up and report the activities of the interest

groups involved. Certainly, the gun debate and associated political conflict were national and public issues involving many Australians and many strong emotions and consequently they became the major issues on the public agenda almost overnight.

The development of the Port Arthur massacre issue in the two newspapers while similar, were different in execution and timing. The sudden and extensive coverage of the massacre as a topic gave salience to the event and thereby created public interest in the outcomes of the story. In comparison, the media coverage of the gun debate and political conflict reveals how the media often reports the occurrences on the public agenda rather than creating or promoting issues along. Indeed, from the further research of the people involved, the strategies and agendas, it is evident that there was far more happening for the gun lobby and in politics than the newspapers reported.

The Management of the Issues:

The analysis of the coverage of the issues in the Sydney Morning Herald and Gold Coast Bulletin reveals how issues rise and fall on the public agenda. While the media plays a role in adding salience to such issues, perceived news-value doesn't last long and the media move onto other 'news' very quickly. Accordingly, for issues to be sustained on the public agenda, as seen in their media coverage, there needs to be continual activity. The theory of issue management suggests that it is possible to influence and even create public interest in an issue and once set, manage issues so that they rise and fall according to a plan. In theory, it is possible for those who understand the media and agenda setting to play an active part in manufacturing and maneuvering events and stories to gain media and public attention.

The gun debate follows this pattern but there have been other similar campaigns that provide for comparison and precedent. The Sydney Harbour Tunnel Campaign for BHP in 1987 is a case in point. This was an exercise in government relations that required a strategy to first stop the New South Wales Cabinet from making a hasty decision and approve the construction of the Tunnel and secondly, have the Cabinet consider another Harbour crossing option. This was an extremely public campaign

extending for some 6 months of intense media coverage of the issues and included up to 4 lead newspaper stories per week. As the Manager of the campaign, I estimate from my record of news items that the campaign was responsible for initiating some 70% of media coverage on the issue during a 6 month period. Although the Tunnel eventually went ahead, it was a very successful campaign for the client company in that it was able to negotiated an alternative business arrangement with its competitor. Here was an example of how the media was used as a public forum to influence public opinion and political decisions.

Initially, John Howard did not plan for an issue management campaign. He reacted with disgust to the killings and as Prime Minister saw an opportunity to respond to the situation and win popular support in the process. After the Port Arthur massacre occurred, John Howard's response to the gun issue was immediate demanding gun control as early as Monday April 29. and Tuesday, April 30. Tuesday's headline read; "PM Takes on Gun Lobby - States pushed for total ban on Semi-automatics' (24)

Bob Katter, a Federal Member for Northern Queensland believed Howard reacted too quickly. "He jumped in without knowing who he was offsiding", says Katter's Press Secretary. (25) But there could be no turning back. John Howard had put his reputation as the Nation's leader up against a divergent group of individuals and organizations who wanted liberal gun ownership.

While 85% of people surveyed in a national poll supported reform or a total ban on guns (26) , 15% were gun ownership supporters. The problem was that most of this 15% were National and Liberal Party voters. John Howard had sought to do perhaps the right thing by the nation but blindly jeopardized his own political fortunes. To maintain his government and to build his leadership, it was necessary for Howard to enter into campaign mode and beat the gun lobby.

The object of the Howard issue management campaign that followed was to persuade the gun supporters that gun reform was in their best political interest. While the gun lobby threatened MPs who didn't give them support, Howard threatened the whole

Government with a general election if they did. Consequently, the gun debate became a political contest over who could hold political power.

The media reported the occurrences and conflicts as they saw them but were themselves part of a larger game of persuasion. Both rational and emotional techniques were used to influence public opinion as well as the morale and behavior of the proponents of the gun ownership. Several techniques can be identified: First, persuasion by scarcity - there was no time for long debates, decisions had to be made before the opportunity was lost; second, persuasion through belonging - gun owners were encouraged to give up their guns and join mainstream Australians; third, the Howard team used the persuasion techniques of association and isolation. (27) Certain people were singled out and associated with issues or organizations that had become politically or socially unpopular in an effort to discredit them. Ted Dane, of the Shooters Association, for example, was associated with League of Rights supporters. Similarly, Queensland Police Commissioner, Russell Cooper, was associated with the gun-crimping issue, which lost support and so did Cooper.

The coup de gras of Howard's persuasion techniques was fear. Perhaps not since the Grime Reaper AIDS Campaign has fear been used so successfully to influence public opinion. As the designer and writer of the National AIDS Campaign, now commonly known as the Grim Reaper Campaign in 1986, I was concerned to overcome social apathy and increase public awareness of AIDS as a lethal threat. In writing the public relations strategy, I proposed that; "... the message should be directed not only at high risk groups but made relevant to the entire population ... the severity of the consequences of this disease cannot be ignored and a powerful social confrontation of the facts is necessary." (28) The success and social effectiveness of this campaign is now well known. The point is that like the Grim Reaper Campaign, fear was used in the gun debate as an issue management technique to influence the behavior of a target audience by bringing about public awareness of the consequences associated with the issue.

Still, the gun debate and the persuasion techniques used to influence political behavior and gun control hides the deeper political concern of the very survival of the Coalition.

As the issue emerged on the political agenda and as Howard sought to capitalize on the opportunity, so too an extreme right wing collective of organizations and individuals saw an opportunity to capture political support. Leading the group was the League of Rights and the Citizen Initiated Referendum Party (29). They sought to move quickly and politicize the issue within conservative ranks and speak out on behalf of the 'bush' concerning individual rights to bear arms. While the National Party could see the advantage in representing its constituents and opposing the anti-gun laws, its own pathological loathing of this right wing group put them in a precarious position.

In the second week of the debate, Bob Katter called John Howard and explained the ramifications of his Gun Control Bill on the 'bush' and how the Coalition was playing into the hands of the loony right. (30) So it was agreed that Bob attend the country regional gun meetings and John would deal with the State Governments and Police Ministers. With Bob Katter becoming the leading spokesperson in the media for the conservatives, it set up a 'good guy - bad guy' routine and isolated the right wing by excluded them from any rational debate and media coverage. There was a conscious effort to demonise the right wing as extremists.

As a specific exercise in issue management, National Party Senator Boswell set about to investigate how the League of Rights with no visible means of support were able to grow so quickly (31). In discovering that the US National Rifle Association and Christian Coalition were supporting the gun lobby, Senator Boswell leaked the information to the media with the explicit aim of isolating the League and the pro-gun lobby as extremists. (32)

As support for gun ownership fell to below 10%, the major farmer organizations such as the National Farmer Federation and the United Grazier Association were forced to endorse the reforms. There was also a weakening in the stand by the shooting organizations with the Professional Shooter Association and the Sporting Shooters willing to listen more readily.

After the initial debate on gun control, the primary objective of the Government was to stop the right wing from building its base within the National and Liberal Parties.

While the gun ownership issue presented an opportunity to the right wing to create political support, they could have chosen any of several such issues to draw emotional and political reaction, such as immigration, gay rights, or euthanasia. Indeed, all they needed was a spokesperson who could present an image and capture the imagination of right-wing voters, and they would have themselves a new political party. Stopping this from happening was the fundamental political agenda behind the gun debate.

It may seem perplexing as to why the Coalition Government gave so much attention to managing the issue and seeking to undermined the credibility and political platform of a seemingly small politically conservative group. The answer lies in the fact that the right wing strategy to arouse emotional responses to social issues gave them potentially the ability to hold more votes than the Greens and the Democrats - two small parties - combined. (33) The emergence of a new right wing political party would draw voters away from both the National and Liberal Parties and possibly bring about the demise of both Parties as they are currently known.

Gun control was an issue on the public agenda because of the Tasmanian massacre and Howard's immediate response to ban automatic and semi-automatic weapons. While it appears that the gun issue had a life of its own, in reality the political and social risks were so great that the political survival issue came to dominate how the gun debate unfolded.

Conclusion:

As Australia and other countries become empowered through its access to information, its citizens are more demanding of social responsibility of both politicians and business. At the same time, it is a more segmented public existing as many 'publics' of varied interests and psycho-social combinations. Communication with a target audience is becoming a more complicated exercise not only because publics are harder to identify but also because the methods of persuasion are moving away from rational appeal to emotional response. The objective, of course, is to create positive emotional responses from the targeted public. In the gun debate, however, Howard failed to

achieve this objective. He passed his laws but created a lot of bad feeling among the Party faithful. Still, the gun lobby performed even worse.

The objective in issue management is to avoid crisis management. Because the gun lobby had not taken up the issue of gun control and managed it properly before the Tasmanian massacre, it was confronted with a crisis after it. There were plenty of warning signs across Australia, Britain and the US to signal that the public would react when something as horrific as the Tasmanian massacre next occurred. But they were not prepared. Their second mistake was to react to Howard publicly by organizing rallies against him and at the same time letting extremists capture the media's attention. All they really achieved was to polarize the nation.

The Tasmanian massacre, the gun debate and the political conflict that followed were all emotionally charged issues. It is perhaps true to say that for most of the debate emotion was a more powerful motivation than reason. Howard got his legislation in the end but at a cost of creating negative emotional baggage that will come back on him at another time. Howard's hard line and personal need to win at any cost, will have repercussions for him in the future.

There are two ways to rule a nation; by consensus or terror. In winning the gun debate Howard used terror. In seeking to isolated and beat the right wing, he ignored the demands of the conservative middle and would not listen to their arguments or incorporate their suggestions. Accordingly, the gun laws that passed will effect far more people than the right wing or maniacs with automatic weapons.

It could be argued that Howard exercised bad issue management. In the long term he may not have achieved his objective - political survival. It may have been better to give in on some of the proponents requests and loose some face but keep that middle conservative group in the fold. The emergence of a new right-wing political party in Australia in 1997 has a direct relation to the political events surrounding the gun debate of 1996.

It is important to observe that political campaigning has used the technique of issue management for many years and that it is currently being more widely used as a corporate management function as well. The composition of both marketing and management as business functions are changing to incorporate communications management. It is quite likely that long term business plans will give way to short term promotional and strategic campaigns as this integrated approach to management takes hold. It is of interest, say Nelson, that "... a significant percentage of major corporate advertising budgets are now spent influencing various target audiences on image, ideological and political issues in contrast to selling consumer goods." (34)

For business, as well as politics, the tracking of issues on the public agenda demonstrate the interrelationship of issues as well as the roles the media and public opinion play in directing such issues. While communications practitioners have sung of the virtues of issue management for some time, it is inevitable that issue management will become more acceptable as a strategic management function in an age where public opinion and corporate image are so important.

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