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Year 2008

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Framing Industrial Relations

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This article was originally published as Kelly, D, The 2007 Federal election in Australia: Framing Industrial Relations, *Social Alternatives*, 27(2), 2008, 33-40.

This paper is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/173>

The 2007 Federal election in Australia: Framing Industrial Relations

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Abstract

The 2007 Federal election campaigns in Australia were characterised by three factors. Most notably, industrial relations played a central role for many voters. Secondly, there was intense and innovative use of media representation and imagery. The *substance* of the differences between the parties was dominated by the framing of *concepts and images* which represented industrial relations in 30-second sound bytes and slogans. Thirdly, what offset the effect of that framing was the new media which offered new opportunities for shaping the public discourse and was utilised extensively. This paper seeks to understand how industrial relations was framed in some of the mass media in 2007, and explores some forms of new media and its role in the election. In so doing, the paper shows the significance of industrial relations as a major issue in the election, and suggests that the new media shaped the public's ideas and opinions.

.. one of the issues that was very important to the Australian people in changing the Government on November 24 was that of WorkChoices ... We've listened to the Australian people, we respect the decisions they have made, and WorkChoices is dead. (Brendan Nelson, 19th December 2008)

Introduction

After eleven years in government, the Liberal Party was voted out of office in November 2007. As Nelson had noted weeks after the election – and for many others on all sides of politics - industrial relations was one of the key issues which led to the election of the Labor Party into government (Interview with Loughnane 2007; Henderson 2007). This paper seeks to explore and evaluate the ways in which industrial relations was portrayed and discussed with regard to the Federal election of November 24th 2007. In particular it seeks to show how mass media tended to frame issues within a narrow pro-business perspective, and how, by contrast, the new media offered alternative perspectives and effective voice to voters.

Three factors stand out as significant in the 2007 Federal election campaigns in Australia. Firstly, industrial relations played a central role in the earlier 'phoney' campaign throughout much of 2007, and the 'official' campaign in October and November. Along with, health, education, 'the economy', foreign policy, and greenhouse / climate change, industrial relations was a central and influential factor, even when both the major parties seemed to distance themselves from issues about work and employment regulation. Secondly, and not surprisingly in an age when image is (almost) all, there was intense and innovative use of media representation and imagery. The *substance* of the differences between the incumbent Liberal Party and the aspiring Labor Party (ALP) was dominated

by the framing of *concepts and images* which represented major issues, including industrial relations in 30-second sound bytes and slogans. In so doing, parties sought to frame issues, and so shape public perceptions (Oliver and Myers 1999; Martin 2004; Carreiro 2005; Klandermans and Goslings 1996). Thirdly and as a corollary of the first two, what increased the importance of industrial relations as a factor was that there were more than ever before multiple fora and multiple voices in contrast to the dominant voice of mass media, as had been the case in previous Australian elections. Rather, in 2007, the mass media representations of industrial relations were diluted by wide and intensive use of new media, notably the various forms of internet interaction such as blogging, activist sites, party websites, and social network sites like Facebook which offer opportunities for wide circulation. The most effective of these also incorporated 'old' modes of electoral persuasion, such as bumper stickers and posters, into the new communication vehicles.

This paper explores these assertions by first seeking to understand the framing of industrial relations in the mass media, and then exploring some forms of new media and their role in the election. In so doing, the paper shows the significance of industrial relations as a major issue, and explores the extent to which the new media might have supplemented or replaced the mass media as a major form of shaping the public's ideas and opinions. First however, a brief foray into the concept of framing shows why it is important in coming to understand the attempts to muster the hearts and minds of voters in the 2007 election.

Media and industrial relations

Politics scholars have long investigated the role of the mass media in

serving as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace [in order to] amuse, entertain inform and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 1; see also Herman and Chomsky 1988).

The patterns of selection of issues, of exclusion and emphasis, of what is covered and how much coverage is given to an issue or concept or value frame, what is seen and what is hidden, and what is important - all of these define what becomes legitimate or desirable in the public discourse. Framing is thus a twofold process – it offers (selected) information or ideas and indicates the ways in which these should be evaluated. In these ways, the media can regulate the range of public discourse precisely because mass media operates in the consumer sphere.

In exploring labour and the media in the USA, Christopher Martin (2004) offers five assumptions about the ways in which mass media frames issues pertaining to labour. These assumptions offer ways of investigating and analysing the framing of coverage of industrial relations in the 2007 Australian election. Firstly, it is assumed in the media that

the consumer rules, with corollary – that if you do not like the product you can vote – in an election or with your wallet, as an individual. Workers unhappy with their job or pay can choose another job. Secondly, with echoes of Samuel Smiles, the workplace is a meritocracy – you get what you deserve, and you can become successful by dint of your own efforts (Rodrick 2002). Thirdly, economic growth is essential and business is the engine of the economy; thus, we must look to business leaders because they have the understanding and knowledge that we should all follow. Fourthly, business should decide on the process of production, exchange and distribution - other parties have no rights to interfere. Business leaders take the responsibility and risk, so it follows that they should decide how businesses are run; thus the process and the organisation of production are not appropriate for public discourse. Fifthly, collective action is undesirable because it interferes with business and the economy. Returning to the first assumption, individuals can take action if a product or political party is not acceptable, but collective action distorts democracy and the free workings of business (Martin, 2004; see also Johnson-Cartee 2005).

These five assumptions underpinned much of the framing of debates in the 2007 election, and indeed much of the representation of industrial relations, particularly in the conservative media.

The Mass media in the 2007 election campaigns.

In this paper the term election campaigns – plural – is used deliberately, because it is evident from an overview of newspaper articles, for example, that both parties began campaigning well before the official announcement in October. Indeed, for many the campaign began with the election of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard to Labor Party leadership in December 2006. From that time, both parties restarted campaigning in earnest. The reshuffle of the Liberal cabinet offered evidence that the Liberal Party saw industrial relations as a major issue, with the more hardline Kevin Andrews being replaced as Minister for Workplace Relations by the seemingly more benign and ebullient Joe Hockey.

Battlelines – and the war-like metaphor was apt – were drawn by the mid-year. Even from early in the year, and unlike recent previous elections, it appeared to many that Labor held a sustainable and winnable position. This was despite its seemingly vulnerable position in industrial relations, given its links to the labour movement. *The Bulletin* confidently claimed in May that if 'IR is the main issue then Labor is toast' ('Labor's Divided Loyalties' 2007). However, initially at least, industrial relations was not obviously a prime issue. For many commentators, it seemed that the Liberal Party offered policies and commentary on an array of substantive issues, and the Labor Party responded with "me-too", albeit with minor differences. Yet, industrial relations was one area where a 'me-too' response was problematic. Moreover, both parties appeared aware of their weak spots in terms of industrial relations. On the one hand, the Coalition government had hoped that its controversial industrial relations legislation, WorkChoices would fade as an issue of public concern, just as the GST had in earlier years, despite singular controversy at its

introduction. On the other hand, like the *Courier Mail*, the Coalition also saw WorkChoices as a major positive outcome for business.

Thus the Liberal Party and many print media commentators framed industrial relations and the labour market as having positive and enduring economic benefits. In this portrayal, and it was frequently repeated, the economy was in excellent shape and unemployment was at record low, largely as a consequence of WorkChoices. So, if a new government were to change the levers which enabled these positive and central attributes, then the labour market and economy would fail. Certainly Prime Minister Howard believed firmly in this logic throughout the campaign. Indeed, in March 2007 he noted famously that 'Working families in Australia have never been better off', (*Hansard*, Australian Parliament March 26 2007; see also 'IR Agenda "not that unpopular"' 2007) and proceeded to reinforce such assertions. By tying industrial relations to economic policy, the Howard Coalition Government and their campaign management in 2007 sought to emphasise the importance of individual economic well-being over other issues.

Not all print media promoted these kinds of images continually, although Gerard Henderson's (2007) post-election assertion that Rudd Labor 'received overwhelming support from the media' is somewhat overstated. More work is needed to deconstruct media approaches to Labor and the labour movement, because there are at times mixed voices. This was true even of those media which had traditionally been steadfastly pro-business. Nevertheless, the examples of framing as Martin (2004) has described, were manifold in the 2007 election. Certainly, the national newspaper, *The Australian*, was strongly critical of Labor throughout much of the election. With two-three major articles on industrial relations most weeks, the national newspaper presented a few clear messages, frequently repeated. At the heart of the debate was the complex and prescriptive WorkChoices legislation which had come into effect in March 2006. The primary intent and effect of the legislation were to substantially reduce union presence and effectiveness, and at the same time greatly increase employers' rights over wages and conditions. In separate legislation, the building and construction industry further limited employee and union rights, but curiously, this received only marginal coverage.

Rather the general assertions held sway. Just before the election, for example, *The Australian* overtly supported the arguments from business 'that WorkChoices has allowed flexibility needed to properly manage growth [noting that]... By agreeing to union demands to weaken Work Choices, Mr Rudd has cut his options ...' (One Me-too Too Few: Keeping WorkChoices' 2007). In the mass media in 2007 then, debates were generally not so much about industrial relations in all its complexity but rather over selected aspects of WorkChoices and its impact on employees, business, and the national economy, with primacy given to the latter. Any mooted Labor changes to the WorkChoices legislation were greeted with serious concern, and almost all government Ministers took time in doorstep and other interviews to assert that Labor's industrial relations policies would kill economic growth, that working families would be worse off and that businesses would be

destroyed. The centrality of employers' rights to flexibility was emphasised, restated, and contrasted with negative alternatives likely under a Labor government, such as rigidities in hours, increased costs of unnecessary penalty rates, and limits on the rights to hire and fire. All of these were portrayed as anathema to business, and so to national economic well-being (Lewis and Karvelas 2007).

Overlaid on these issues were repeated expressions of concern emphasising the undesirability and illegitimacy of trade unions. Such detrimental organisations had no place in the modern economy. In this light, union campaigns against WorkChoices, most notably the 'expensive ACTU-funded campaign' ('One Me-too Too Few', 2007; Kelly 2007), and union financial support for Labor, revealed not only evidence of the inextricable link between the Labor Party and the trade union movement, but also, by default, the undesirability of a Labor government.

The larger referendum issue is the threatened take-over of the national labour market by a much empowered trade union movement. This will be presented as being the greatest single threat to economic prosperity ('Labor's Divided Loyalties' May 14, 2007).

Moreover, the notion that, under Labor, unions would have excessive power was coupled with terms like 'union thugs' ('Fear of Union Violence' 2007; Masanuskas 2007). For example, the activist and militant unionist, Dean Mighell, was mentioned in over 200 articles in *The Australian*, in many of which he was the primary subject. The logic appeared that if unions were peopled by union thugs, and the Labor Party was beholden to the trade union movement, itself undesirable, then Australia would be run by union thugs. This was a theme to which the Liberal Party would return in the latter stages, with campaign images of Labor's front bench as being union-dominated ('Hysterical Claims' 2007).

All of these notions were well encapsulated in the *Bulletin* in January 2007.

Yet Labor is embarking on a march into the past, not a vision for the future. It reflects a party still dictated to by union "mates" more concerned about their own survival... In this sense, being forced to go back to the ACTU's 1970s-style collective bargaining will not only stifle major productivity improvements but confirm the puppet status, and weakness, of the new Labor leader. The signs are ominous. Earlier this month, ACTU president Sharan Burrow asserted: "The Labor leadership has committed themselves to tearing up [WorkChoices] ..." Rudd and Gillard tugged the forelock.... ('Hit the road' 2007).

Despite such portrayals, there was increasing evidence that Kevin Rudd's 'economic conservatism' and restrained approaches in the media were gaining and maintaining popularity (Grattan 2007a). As a result, the government bolstered its attacks by making

increasing capital of Labor's seemingly contradictory stance which was positive about the potential effect of unions, yet still asserted its commitment to business. From the perspective of commentators, it was an impossibility to both acknowledge unions and claim a genuine commitment to business priorities. This was further emphasised when newspapers, radio and television interviews made much of Julia Gillard's left origins, and how these could be seen to contradict the image of fiscal conservatism. These tactics were successful and often through July and August, Julia Gillard was emphasising the high priority she gave to competitiveness, and the tough stance Labor would take on unions when elected ('Labor's Divided Loyalties' 2007).

No one should be fearful about unlawful conduct being ignored under Labor," Ms Gillard told ABC radio. "We will make sure that there is tough compliance at all times. " SMH 2/8/07; See also Collier 2007; Lewis, 2007)

On the other hand, over much of 2007, despite strong government and media claims to the contrary, evidence appeared to be mounting that WorkChoices had indeed led to increasing disadvantage, just as diverse groups of unionists, churches and progressive commentators had claimed would happen. A range of academic research on, *inter alia*, declining wages and conditions for vulnerable workers, especially women and young workers, was published and publicised throughout 2007 (Peetz 2007). In July, for example, research found that school students were working longer hours to make up for income reductions through the elimination of penalty rates which had been made possible under WorkChoices. The Coalition response to these kinds of findings was repeated each time – the research and its methodology was worthless, the findings spurious, and in any case, the research was predictably union funded. This was not new to the 2007 election campaign – leading IR researchers David Peetz and Barbara Pocock had been accused of much worse in 2006 when publicising research findings of increasing disadvantage. Indeed one assertion was that publishing such research indicated that one of them was a terrorist. In terms of this paper, though, what made these public responses important was that in belittling academics, the worth of their research was publicly demeaned and delegitimated (Hannan 2007; Marr 2007).

Nevertheless, some newsworthy events enhanced Labor's claims. Underpayment of young workers, forced casualisation, and reduced conditions made good newsworthy stories. Well-known retail companies like Darrell Lea and Spotlight had sought to reduce conditions and pay using AWAs, while the plight of young individuals being required to work for no payment in the guise of training, made good front page material. A 'good stoush' always sells newspapers and these kinds of stories were often news of the day. Yet their impact was modest in fair part because they were presented as a rarity, the freak show amid the dominant normalcy of good employment relations. Thus, rather than lead to a discussion and analysis of the patterns of employment that were emerging, many of the stories were presented as a brief exhibition for entertainment. It was also argued that these stories had a limited life As Shanahan (2007a) noted in March:

Another problem Labor faced in running the industrial relations campaign on the first anniversary of the [WorkChoices] legislation was that it had run out of hard-luck stories of the sky-is-falling variety. Most workers do not feel immediately threatened by the IR laws.

Nevertheless, the Government sought to soften its approaches with the re-introduction of a no-disadvantage or Fairness test in May and the recasting of the Office of Workplace Services as the Workplace Ombudsman. The Fairness Test proved to be bureaucratically daunting, and many of the 'softening' changes were in representation rather than substance. Such changes nevertheless reveal the importance that the Howard government gave to upholding the substance of WorkChoices. It was the same with the announcement of a new website for young workers announced by Workplace relations Minister Joe Hockey a few days before the election date was announced. While asserting that 'Young people have been exploited by employers forever ...' Minister Hockey also emphasised the value of the new website, noting that 'There are more protections for young workers today than at any other time ...' (Karvelas, 2007). On the one hand then, the Liberal Party was seeking to emphasise the importance of the IR legislation to sustain the golden economy, but on the other hand in the face of increasingly articulated concerns about the negative effects of WorkChoices, they proposed ameliorative initiatives to offset concerns (Louw 2007).

It was not only the Liberal Party which presented ambivalent approaches. Throughout 2007, the Labor leaders asserted the need for major changes to the legislation, particularly major alterations to the extent and processes of AWAs. However, they also sought to distance themselves from unions and 'union power'. Indeed, around the middle of 2007, it almost seemed as if Labor wanted little to do with industrial relations issues, generally. It was at this time too that the Liberal Party campaigners took stronger initiatives on the promotion of WorkChoices as a central benefit. These initiatives included increased push polling, a major advertisement campaign costing over \$60 million, and intense lobbying of employer organisations to fund pro-WorkChoices campaigns.

In general, however, much of the mass media took up the Liberal Party framing of industrial relations, and enhanced it. National well-being was conflated with the need to uphold business priorities, and the rights of business to self-determination were accorded greater weight than employee and labour priorities. The complexities of employment relations were eschewed in favour of polarisation; 'flexibility' was superior to 'rigidity', economic wellbeing was more desirable than 'back to the bad old days of union power'. Such ideas were neatly encapsulated in an editorial in *The Australian* in May

Once Labor was in power unions would be able to get whatever they wanted, including the reintroduction of pattern bargaining, which allows the highest-won pay deals to flow through to areas less able, or unable, to pay. This is exactly what

The Australian has been concerned about. It is a mindset that has in the past fostered industrial thuggery on the waterfront and in the construction industry and for decades held the nation to ransom. The personal enrichment of union thugs comes at great cost, not only to employers, but the economic wellbeing of the nation.

The election, industrial relations and new media

While much of the mass media sought to promote individual economic well-being as a core and the Liberal Party as the only means to achieving that core, there were other voices which by 2007 were increasingly well articulated. What differentiated the 2007 election from prior elections in Australia was the extensive and effective use of new media, and concomitantly the role played by non-party actors. While this deserves more thoroughgoing analysis than is possible here, it is clear that any discussion of the 2007 election campaign needs to take account of the new media, especially with reference to industrial relations.

The new media encompasses the multiple forms of public expression and dissemination of ideas enabled by modern information and communication technology. In Australia for example, the number of home computers doubled in the first years of the twenty-first century, while ownership of mobile phones tripled from 24 per cent in 1996 to 72 per cent 10 years later. However, the greatest change in the last decade has been home access to the internet which was a mere 4 per cent in 1996 and grew to over 60 per cent by 2005-6, and with a concomitant increase in the intensity of use (ABS 2007).

The 1998 wharf dispute in Australia had shown some potential for new media as a form of expression and activism (see e.g. *Bastard Boys* 2007; Rice 1999), but in the intervening years many more vehicles for dissemination had developed and their use expanded. Email traffic has increased significantly, while forms of blogging, e-journals and bulletins have enabled more complex ideas and issues to be conveyed ('It's the Links Stupid' 2007; 'Howard Makes Final Pitch' 2007). Blogging is a method for individuals to argue opinions or present ideas on a personal or shared website. Blogging has developed rapidly in recent years (Glaser 2006). What has made the new forms of interaction like blogging a potentially very important factor in politics, is the capacity to disseminate ideas and information very rapidly and extensively. Anyone can become a 'published author, although in some cases material may be moderated or refereed according to a site's standards or perspectives. For example, public opinion sites like *New Matilda* and *Crikey* offer lengthy pieces and considered perspectives that are often excluded from print, television and radio mass media. Most organisations have their own websites where they seek to frame their priorities and activities. The newest forms of social interaction and dissemination of ideas have occurred in the twenty-first century with the growth of networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo, and the video-sharing site, YouTube. All played a role in the 2007 election campaign, albeit not all effectively.

What the new media offered to individuals were clear alternatives for discussion and dissemination of ideas and concepts, well beyond the repeated and carefully framed depictions in the mass media. Previously much of the public discourse during an election – over the parties, the issues, the developments - had been shaped by the predominant purveyors of ideas, the mass media (print, television and radio). With the advent and growing effective use of the new media, mass media images and projections could now be diluted by the multiple, albeit sometimes fragmented, vehicles of the new media, which, in turn, gave voice to those previously excluded or marginalised.

In a presidential style election where the focus is on the leaders, it is not surprising that all the major parties used their websites to promote party leaders and senior contenders. The Liberal Party offered extensive material seeking to counter Labor claims. Imagery was important to both parties. The cover of one Liberal publication offered a particularly unflattering picture of Labor Deputy Julia Gillard, while the Labor Party offered innuendos on the ageing Prime Minister Howard. This was little different from previous elections however, and relied on voters seeking out the party websites. What was new was the use made by both parties of YouTube presentations by leaders. These were clearly directed at younger voters, the group which had perhaps been most negatively affected by WorkChoices. While not entirely effective – neither John Howard nor Kevin Rudd appeared comfortable – YouTube, Facebook and the like offered a form of reaching out to particular groups of voters.

Perhaps the most effective use of new media came through the progressivist and activist sites such as GetUp and, the ACTU directed Your Rights at Work. These offered opportunities not only to express ideas, debate and discuss issues, describe personal experiences, but most notably to be engaged in the election process, rather than as passive recipients of information. This is not new – the process of blogging came about claimed one of its earliest exponents because ‘it was better than kicking the television’. What was most notable about Your Rights at Work (YRAW) was that it assumed that visitors to the site wanted to be engaged and active. Thus it offered activities ranging from email campaigns, opportunities for fund-raising and space to describe personal stories, upload photos and explain their concerns. Of themselves, these were neither new nor novel. Indeed the prevalent Your Rights at Work stickers and posters were old methods – but they were purveyed through the YRAW site and became an effective and instantly recognisable logo. Moreover, by its comprehensiveness, enduring enthusiasm and inclusivity, YRAW offered opportunities for even the most cautious of participants to become involved. Over 400 individuals sought advice on Rights Watch over 2007, while comments from participants in the YRAW campaigns required more than 70 pages of printing. In large part, these activities drew on revitalised union organising campaigns, where engagement and involvement of participants was a central strategy.

In the parlance of 1970s feminism, sites such as YRAW enabled a consciousness raising

exercise which in turn changed perceptions, approaches and actions. As Solomon (2007) argued on the Centre for Policy Development (CPD) website shortly after the election 'Emboldened by the empowerment of a truly democratic internet, political movements can flourish on their ideas and momentum alone. The internet can also undermine and invert traditional power structures'. This effectiveness lies in the very actions that individuals can take and the ways in which they can express their concerns. The ethereal effects of political party 'spin' could be deconstructed and analysed.

Of course, not all of the new media initiatives were effective – many of the YouTube presentations appeared to enable spoofs rather than new or renewed interest in politicians' ideas. And when the ACTU brought out three US workers whose stories of difficult working lives were widely uploaded from YouTube, the peak union body was not to know that these workers would praise current superior Australian working conditions. Nevertheless, large numbers of individuals became involved, many seemingly former swinging voters, and fund-raising proved to be highly effective in these internet activist campaigns.

More importantly perhaps, in giving form to personal concerns and vague fears about working conditions in the future, in presenting hidden ideas for debate and concern, the new media played a major role in shaping the discourse over industrial relations in the 2007 election campaigns. Of all the central issues in the 2007 election, industrial relations was one fundamental policy area that was entirely suited to such campaigns, and could sustain extensive campaign development. As was apparent from stories in the YRAW site, work is a factor that directly or indirectly affects all voters. Parents expressed concern for the working future of their children or grandchildren, and young workers questioned their working futures. Increasing access to, and use of, the new media enabled a channel and a community building capacity through which ideas could be conveyed and debated. Moreover, materially, in the case of the YRAW campaign, the ACTU and state and local peak union councils could provide essential infrastructure. Instead of fragmented and individualised unease, employees and their families could share their stories and focus their concerns through actions, large or small. There were other major issues in the 2007 election campaigns – climate, foreign policy, education, health. What made industrial relations an important one, was not only the impact of the WorkChoices legislation on all sections of society but the new capacity to mobilise concerns through existing infrastructure, clever planning and effective use of new media.

Conclusion

As implied in the opening quote to this paper, industrial relations proved to be a significant and central factor in the 2007 election. This paper has primarily focussed on the print media to show how certain frames presented the Labor Party and the labour movement as being undesirable to individual and national economic well-being. The Liberal Party was effective in shaping the agenda this way, to the extent that the Labor Party sought to respond in like manner. Yet as the election campaigns proceeded, there

was increasingly successful portrayal of the Howard Government's WorkChoices legislation as having disadvantaged people. The 'golden economy', itself an essential image of Liberal Party framing, appeared progressively more threatened by economic factors such as rising interest rates. Empowered by opportunities for individual expression in newspaper blogs and activist sites, what had been the fragmented voices against AWAs, loss of conditions, increased employer rights to fire workers and the like, became more coherent and articulated, and seemed to replace the mass media frames which gave primacy to business and the economy. The actual extent and nature of the effects of new media, and whether organisations have the capacity to sustain the freshness and effectiveness evident in the 2007 election campaign deserve further research.

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