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## Refugees in the 2001 Australian federal election: an analysis using the backfire model

Andrew Herd  
*University of Wollongong*

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# **REFUGEES IN THE 2001 AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL ELECTION: AN ANALYSIS USING THE BACKFIRE MODEL**

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree**

**Master of Arts**

**from**

**University of Wollongong**

**by**

**Andrew Herd, BAppEc (UC)**

**School of History and Politics  
Faculty of Arts**

**2006**

## **Thesis Certification**

I, Andrew Herd, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts, in the School of History and Politics, Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Andrew Herd

October 2006

# **Abstract**

The issue of asylum seekers was central to the 2001 Australian federal election campaign. Of several incidents involving asylum seekers during the campaign, two have become essential to the election narrative: the so-called children overboard and SIEV X incidents. Although both incidents involved asylum seekers, they were also quite different. During children overboard, the Government was very quick to inform the public of what occurred, although this was later proven wrong, whereas the Government did not wish to publicise the deaths of 353 asylum seekers onboard SIEV X. Most Australians are now well aware of the truth behind children overboard, but the controversy surrounding SIEV X is still relatively unknown.

Both cases illustrate that the Australian Government was able to minimise public outrage over its actions — actions which, according to a number of people, should have caused mass outrage. The central aim of this thesis is therefore to analyse how the Government managed to prevent outrage over its actions.

One method for analysing how those in power, such as governments, inhibit outrage is the backfire model. The backfire model builds on the concept of ‘political jiu-jitsu’ and classifies Government actions into five methods: cover-up; devaluation of the target; reinterpretation of the event; using official channels; and intimidation and bribery. Extensive evidence is presented showing that in both cases, children overboard and SIEV X, the Government implemented all five methods.

Recognising when a government attempts to implement one of the methods allows activists to execute their own counter-strategies, and in doing so challenge the government’s authority and bring about positive social change.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AEST	Australian Eastern Standard Time
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ALP	Australian Labor Party
APS	Australian Public Service
ASIO	Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation
AWB	Australian Wheat Board
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
CO	Commanding Officer
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
IDC	Interdepartmental Committee
IDSRR	Indonesian Maritime Search and Rescue Area of Responsibility
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
LAPD	Los Angeles Police Department
ONA	Office of National Assessments
PII	Potential Illegal Immigrant
PM&C	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
PPV	Permanent Protection Visa
PST	People Smuggling Taskforce
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RHIB	Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat
SIEV	Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel
SUNC	Suspected Unauthorised Non-Citizen
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## List of Main Characters

**Commander Norman Banks:** Commander of HMAS *Adelaide*

**Admiral Chris Barrie:** Chief of Defence Force

**Mr Tim Bloomfield:** Director of Media Liaison, Department of Defence

**Rear Admiral Marcus Bonser:** Director General of Coastwatch

**Brigadier Gary Bornholt:** Military Adviser, Public Affairs and Corporate Communication, Department of Defence

**Captain Belinda Byrne:** Brigadier Bornholt's Staff Officer

**Commander Piers Chatterton:** Director of Operations, Royal Australian Navy

**Mr Clive Davidson:** Chief Executive Officer, Australian Maritime Safety Authority

**Mr Bill Farmer:** Secretary, DIMA

**Ms Jane Halton:** Chair of PST, PM & C

**Dr Brendan Hammer:** Branch Head, Defence Branch, PM & C

**Mr Ross Hampton:** Media Adviser, Minister for Defence, Peter Reith

**Dr Allan Hawke:** Secretary, Department of Defence

**Mr Peter Hendy:** Chief Staff, Minister for Defence, Peter Reith

**Mr John Howard:** Prime Minister

**Mr Brian Humphreys:** Director General, Communications Strategies, Department of Defence

**Air Marshal Angus Houston:** Acting Chief of the Defence Force

**Mr Kim Jones:** Director-General, Office of National Assessments

**Mr Miles Jordana:** International Adviser, Prime Minister, John Howard

**Commander Stefan King:** Defence Force Liaison Officer, PM&C

**Ms Jenny McKenry –** Head of Public Affairs and Corporate Communication, Department of Defence

**Abu Quassey:** People Smuggler

**Mr Peter Reith:** Minister for Defence

**Rear Admiral Chris Ritchie:** Commander Australian Theatre

**Mr Philip Ruddock:** Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

**Mr Mike Scafton:** Military Advisory, Minister for Defence, Peter Reith

**Vice Admiral David Shackleton:** Chief of the Navy

**Ms Harinder Sidhu:** Defence Branch, International Division

**Brigadier Mike Silverstone:** Commander, Northern Command

**Rear Admiral Geoff Smith:** Naval Component Commander

**Air Vice Marshal Titheridge:** Head, Strategic Command Division

**Group Captain Steven Walker:** Director, Joint Operations

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## **Publications in Support of this Thesis**

The following articles have been published during the writing of this thesis:

**Andrew Herd**, 'Amplifying Outrage over Children Overboard', *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2006, pp. 59-63.

**Andrew Herd**, 'Official Channels or Public Action: Refugees in Australia', *Flinders Journal of History and Politics*, Vol. 23, 2006, pp. 117-134.