

Howard's dirty tricks campaign committee

How the Australian election was subverted

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Three months after the Australian general election, information is starting to come to light of a dirty tricks operation, involving upper echelons of the public service, the military and intelligence agencies, aimed at subverting the election process and ensuring the re-election of the Howard government.

A small cabal of handpicked government advisers was placed in charge of fomenting an ongoing anti-refugee scare campaign. Lies and slanders were circulated to justify brutal military measures. "Border protection" was placed at the centre of the election campaign, at the exclusion of every other issue.

To understand the reason for such desperate measures, one must review the political and economic situation leading up to the election. A string of major corporations had collapsed, tens of thousands of jobs were being destroyed and the Australian dollar had plunged to all-time lows. Howard's government was in crisis, facing growing hostility and resentment. After the conservative parties were swept out of office in a number of state elections, it seemed that the defeat of the federal Coalition was all but assured.

The dirty tricks operation began with the Tampa incident in late August, when the prime minister personally intervened to prevent 433 Afghan refugees aboard the Norwegian freighter from seeking asylum in Australia. The refugees had been rescued in waters off the north-west coast after their fishing boat sank. Howard and his minders seized upon the incident to manufacture a national crisis and poison the political climate. With the support of the media and the Labor opposition, sweeping new powers were introduced, under the Border Protection and Migration Amendment legislation, allowing the military to forcibly remove refugee boats from Australian waters.

The navy was directed to patrol Australia's north-west coast and chase away refugee boats. The government's aim was to provoke a series of confrontations and an atmosphere of constant crisis.

A small committee was set up inside the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to control events. This was no ordinary election committee. It was not comprised of the usual party functionaries, hired media advisers and spin doctors—these people were operating from the various Liberal Party offices—but top layers of the state apparatus: public servants, the military brass and intelligence personnel—all, supposedly, politically neutral government employees.

The committee's operations have surfaced in the past few days because of its role in propagating a lie that was to figure prominently throughout the campaign: that a group of asylum seekers on a boat bound for Australia threw their children overboard. The lie served to assist the government in stampeding public opinion and clawing its way back into office.

The media and the committee's participants have woven a complex web of confusion and deceit around their activities. Nevertheless a fairly accurate account of what transpired can be pieced together.

The "People Smuggling Task Force," (PSTF) was chaired by senior

Howard adviser, Jane Halton, and included the head of the Immigration Department, Bill Farmer, Group Captain Steve Walker from the Defence Force and other influential Canberra officials. It met regularly in Canberra throughout the month-long election campaign.

On the morning of October 7, two days after Howard called the election, Halton received a personal briefing from the head of Defence Strategic Command, Air Vice Marshal Alan Titheridge. This was in line with a specific directive from Defence Minister Peter Reith the day before that, henceforth, Titheridge should directly convey confidential "border protection" information to Halton, circumventing the armed forces' normal chain of command. Titheridge informed Halton that a navy frigate *HMAS Adelaide* had intercepted a boatload of refugees near Christmas Island. The operation was still underway and he was only able to give her a third-hand account of events that were still unfolding. Titheridge told Halton that some of the passengers had thrown their children overboard. He had heard this from Brigadier Silverstone, who had spoken to the *Adelaide* captain, Commander Banks. Soon after, Halton passed the information on to a meeting of the PSTF.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock telephoned during the meeting and was told the "news" by his departmental head, Farmer. Ruddock immediately convened a press conference. He told the assembled journalists that the navy had intercepted a group of Iraqi asylum seekers who had thrown their children into the sea. Creatively embellishing the story as he went along, Ruddock alleged that the parents' aim was to "blackmail" the Australian navy into picking them up and taking them ashore by placing their children's lives at risk.

"I regard this as one of the most disturbing practices I've come across," he declared. "It was clearly planned and premeditated [with] the intention of putting us under duress."

Ruddock's press conference set the tone for the rest of the election campaign. In interview after interview, government ministers took to the airwaves to vilify the "boat people". Howard insisted their behaviour was "against the natural instinct." A government senator declared they were "repulsive . . . and unworthy of Australia". The Opposition Labor Party leader Kim Beazley weighed in, accusing the Iraqis of committing "an outrageous act" which he "absolutely condemned." The passengers' alleged actions became the new justification for the government's anti-refugee crusade.

But what actually happened on the morning of October 7? A small, rickety Indonesian fishing vessel, straining under the weight of 223 men, women and children cramped on deck, was intercepted by the *Adelaide* in Australian territorial waters and ordered to turn back. The crew refused. The navy fired four warning shots, 50 feet in front of the vessel. Three minutes later more rounds were fired, followed by another 23 shots right near the boat. Then the navy boarded. In the ensuing turmoil and confusion, several terrified refugees jumped overboard, believing they were about to be killed. One father lifted his child up high to indicate that children were on board and the shooting should stop. Not one child was

thrown overboard.

At 5pm on October 7, just hours after Ruddock had launched his tirade, PSTF member Group Captain Walker advised the taskforce, after checking with his superiors, that there was no documentary evidence that children had been thrown overboard. Darwin command had apparently misheard what Commander Banks had said. Walker urged caution. But the rest of the taskforce preferred Halton's initial version, which neither they, nor the media, had questioned, let alone verified. Clearly, a backdown would have embarrassed the government and compromised its vendetta. So Walker's advice was simply ignored. Halton proceeded to prepare a briefing for both Howard and Reith, which referred to "passengers throwing their children into the sea." The memorandum was faxed to the two politicians that night and became the basis for their subsequent media interviews.

In other words, on the very day the incident took place, Howard's committee was told that children had not been thrown overboard. The members nevertheless decided to proceed with the story.

The next day, October 8, the fishing boat began to sink. The crew of the *Adelaide* took the desperate and exhausted passengers on board, rescuing dozens of them from the water. Some three hundred digital photographs were taken of the rescue, each marked with the date and time it was shot.

Commander Banks emailed the photographs to Defence Force offices, along with an explanatory text explaining the circumstances of the rescue. The following day, October 9, Defence Public Relations officially informed Reith's media adviser, Ross Hampton, as well as various Defence personnel, about the photographs.

On October 10, Banks, who had read the false reports in the media about the events of October 7, told Brigadier Silverstone that no child had been thrown overboard. Silverstone sent the advice up the chain of command to various Defence officials.

On the same day, Howard's office telephoned Hampton in Reith's office asking whether the photographs could be released to the media, to back up the "children overboard" story. The prime minister's staff also phoned Halton. Aware that at least some senior Defence officers were disputing the veracity of the story, they asked her to check it out with Strategic Command. She did, and shortly after received a formal written report stating "There is no indication that children were thrown overboard."

Meanwhile, Defence staff emailed to Hampton at least seven of the rescue photographs. Following a specific request from Reith's office, Defence had removed the explanatory text accompanying the pictures. Most of the photos showed the sinking boat, surrounded by dozens of people in the water. But just two blurred shots were selected for release to the media, and it seems they were severely edited. They showed only one child and two other people in the middle of an empty expanse of water. There was no fishing boat and no navy frigate. Nor were there any captions, and the date and time had been deleted.

That afternoon, Defence Minister Reith was interviewed on Melbourne radio. He announced that he now had "proof" of the incident. "It did happen. The fact is the children were thrown in to the water... we have produced the photos." Reith also claimed that the navy had taken a video, which showed children being thrown into the sea.

Both before and after Reith's radio interview, Brigadier Gary Bornholt, from Defence public relations, contacted Reith's office to make clear that the photos were of the rescue on October 8, not children being thrown overboard. He even left a message to this effect on the Hampton's mobile phone.

That night, the ABC's prestigious nightly current affairs program, *The 7.30 Report*, broadcast the photographs as evidence that the child-throwing allegations by Howard, Reith and Ruddock were correct. Again, no-one bothered to insist on any verification. None of the most obvious questions were asked. When were the photographs taken? What else was

going on at the time? Who else was in the water? Where was the boat? By now, any slander against refugees, no matter how grotesque, was unquestioningly accepted as good coin.

Ignoring the written report from Strategic Command, which informed Halton that no evidence existed for the "children overboard" claim, she decided that the photographs released by Reith provided adequate "proof" that the incident had occurred. The *Daily Telegraph* splashed the photos all over its front page, under the headline "Proof that boat people threw children overboard". Later, the newspaper claimed that the government ministers' statements (based on Halton's advice) were "proof" of the photographs' authenticity.

The next morning, October 11, high-level Defence officials met to work out how to respond to the continuing false reports. Some time around 10am, Reith was personally informed that the photographs did not depict children who had been thrown into the sea.

Nevertheless the "children overboard" lie continued to take centre stage in the government's election campaign. Reith's office issued a directive forbidding any Defence Force official to publicly speak on the issue to the media. Reith also gagged the crew of the *HMAS Adelaide*.

On October 31, Brigadier Silverstone, commander of the joint task force dealing with the asylum seekers, had a conversation with Reith about the video, which the minister was still insisting contained further proof that children had been thrown into the sea. Notes taken of the exchange record Silverstone saying: "Minister, the video does not show a child being thrown into the water." Reith responded: "Well, we'd better not see the video then."

On November 7, three days before the election, residents on Christmas Island told the media that crew members from the *Adelaide*—participants in the events of October 7—had reported to them that the incident never happened. The crew were reportedly furious at the lies being told in Canberra, and even more furious at being gagged.

Reporters began asking questions. Howard, who was due to address the National Press Club the next day, directed his staff to contact the government's key intelligence assessment agency, the Office of National Assessments, for a report on the incident. When asked about the conflicting accounts, the Prime Minister cited the ONA's report: "Asylum seekers wearing lifejackets jumped into the sea and children were thrown in with them."

It turns out that, according to the head of ONA, the organisation "did not have independent information about the incident." It relied, instead, on media reports "and had placed a high level of credibility on the reports because they reflected statements by ministers."

So, Halton relied on the photographs released by Reith's department; the media relied on Halton's report (on which the ministers based their statements) and the ONA relied on the media. The whole conspiracy formed a very neat, closed circle.

On election day, the Liberals published full-page advertisements with a large slogan reinforcing their election message: "We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come."

Aware that the growing controversy over the "children overboard" lie would not simply disappear, Howard decided, immediately after the election, to begin organising his own defence. He directed two reports to be prepared: one by the Defence Force and one by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet—the two organisations responsible for circulating the lie in the first place. The Defence report was handed over to Howard's department in December. Jennifer Bryant, an employee of Howard's department, a member of the PSTF and a colleague of Jane Halton, was appointed to write up the second report.

The prime minister tabled the two reports last Wednesday after parliament resumed from a three-month recess. This was his first opportunity, and he used it to conduct a pre-emptive strike, for the purposes of damage control. Both reports made clear that the "children

overboard” incident never happened and that repeated efforts by various military officers to correct the false story were blocked or ignored.

But the reports also succeeded in carrying out their primary aim: the exoneration of Howard and Ruddock. Let us review how this was done:

1) The Prime Minister’s Department did not have direct control over what would be included in the Defence report. Bryant therefore had to reconcile the contents of her report with the information contained in the Defence report. Luckily she had the latter well in advance, two months before the reports would be tabled.

2) The Defence report detailed how various military officials had informed the members of the PSTF and other government advisers that the “children overboard” story was false. But the line from Howard and Ruddock was that they were never told of this. If they had been told, and they therefore knew the story wasn’t true, then they both lied. Under the Westminster parliamentary system, lying is an offence that requires immediate resignation. So an explanation had to be devised as to how at least 31 senior government and military officials were aware of the truth, but it failed to reach the ears of the two politicians.

3) According to Bryant’s report, the various bureaucrats simply omitted to tell their superiors. A lot was happening, wires got crossed, people were busy, they didn’t receive messages. And there were, after all, contradictory accounts. It was difficult to know what was true. But the report was adamant. Howard and Ruddock were never told and they never lied.

4) The fall guy was Peter Reith. Having retired from politics at the last election, the former Defence Minister had become politically expendable.

If the report is true, only one conclusion can be drawn. A small group of unelected government officials organised a conspiracy, behind the backs of senior ministers, to feed them lies and corrupt the election process. But what would be their motive? They were, after all, implementing Howard’s own agenda—slandering refugees, providing a rationale for ejecting them and, in the process, bolstering the likelihood of Howard’s re-election.

If the report is false, even more serious issues arise. Not only did Howard repeatedly lie, he went to extraordinary lengths to cover his tracks. And he was aided and abetted by a number of others, including the report’s author. According to her report, the prime minister never officially received Defence Force briefings on the “children overboard”, or saw the original navy photographs. This means that Howard’s top advisers conspired with him to avoid leaving any paper trail. Everything was done with a wink and a nod. Howard, in other words, led an elaborate ruse, involving his own department, the military and intelligence, aimed at hoodwinking the Australian public and hijacking the election.

Howard has been forced to admit that some of his advisers did, indeed, know the truth. But this simply doesn’t square with his actions. Not one of them has been called to account. No disciplinary action, no reprimands or requests for resignations. Jane Halton, the woman at the centre of the scandal, has, instead, been promoted to head the Department of Health and was last month awarded a public service medal for “distinguished public service”.

In the final analysis, the conspiracy only succeeded because it was never challenged. From the gutter press and rightwing talk-back radio hosts to the most reputable current affairs programs and “liberal” broadsheets, the media played along, uncritically reporting every lie and slander. As for the Labor Party, it jumped on the bandwagon from day one. While a great deal of shouting and moralising is underway now, not a single Labor politician opened their mouth in the course of the campaign to attack Howard’s policy or question his vilification of refugees. Both the press and the Labor opposition were as equally committed as the government to suppressing any genuine discussion or debate about the deepening social and political crisis.

The 233 asylum seekers involved have been removed from the scene,

conveniently dumped on Manus Island, a far-flung, malaria-infested outpost, located on the equator, some 400 kilometres from Papua-New Guinea. The media is barred from speaking with them and they have been given no opportunity to clear their names.

Whether Howard will survive the continuing fallout from the “children overboard” affair is unclear. A full Senate inquiry begins on March 25. Last week Howard confidently announced he would allow any public servant to testify. Yesterday he qualified his remarks, indicating he may veto his most senior advisers, military personnel and government ministers.

There is no doubt that there is considerable opposition to Howard within sections of the military. A former Admiral has accused the government of a Goebbels-style Big Lie campaign, while other senior figures have slammed Howard’s border protection policy, accusing Howard of misusing the navy for political purposes, destroying its credibility and creating profound mistrust within its ranks. Leaks are occurring almost daily, some from high-level military sources, revealing, for example, the government’s use of intelligence agencies against Australian citizens in pursuit of its anti-refugee agenda.

Whatever Howard’s immediate fate, the recent election campaign marked a turning point in Australian politics. First and foremost, it reveals the rot and decay of bourgeois democracy. At the very point where the masses of ordinary people were supposed to be able to exercise their right to choose and to vote, the whole process was poisoned and corrupted by an unelected cabal, working closely with the most senior political figures.

Secondly, the treatment meted out to a group of vulnerable refugees has profound implications for the working class as a whole. It demonstrates the extent to which the ruling elite and its political representatives will go in protecting their own interests and undermining fundamental democratic rights. This must be taken as a serious warning of the methods that will be used in the coming period, as social tensions deepen and genuine oppositional movements begin to emerge.



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