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John Howard and the Race Question

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Abstract

John Howard's eleven-year prime ministership may indicate his success and longevity as a conservative politician. The question of race was always problematic for John Howard's vision of Australia. When in Opposition, he was silent on the question of apartheid in South Africa and in the late 1980s he was insistent that Chinese immigration to Australia was unsettling and should be significantly reduced. His parliamentary record indicates a continuous silence on the question of indigenous Australians. During his period in office, the deployment of a manipulative political strategy on the question of race was discernible.

This paper will examine Howard's racialised agenda on two controversial issues: the plight of the refugees on the Tampa and the military-style intervention into remote indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The Howard Coalition government summoned the powers of the state to defend the nation against these apparent threats to the social order.

The concept of race in politics is a subject of intense debate. The contentiousness of this debate stems from the fact that a nation's culture and identity often derives from this foundation. In turn, an understanding of this foundation is integral to political success and longevity. Dangerously, this process often leads to the promotion and consolidation of a racial commonsense, which serves to both justify and maintain racial inequalities in society. This paper seeks to examine how issues of race have been used in coalition policy and how it has incited deep societal divisions. Moreover, it will argue that the Howard years have seen race based policies brought to the forefront and demonstrate how race has been used to both stigmatise and marginalise minority groups in the Australian context. More specifically, it will examine how race based policies have been used by the coalition government in a bid to consolidate power.

John Howard will be remembered as one of the most successful Prime Ministers in the history of Australian Politics. Throughout his parliamentary career and particularly during his 11-year term as leader of the Liberal Party, he sidelined 'politically correct', elitist' (Jupp 2002, 199) criticism, secured the undecided 'soft' voter and demonstrated to the Australian public that he was both a highly competent politician and a formidable opponent. His lengthy tenure and tenacity in government is not only remarkable but deserves some explanation. This paper will show that Howard was not lucky, rather his lengthy tenure can be attributed to his understanding of race and subsequent employment of a clever and learned strategy – the mastering of the dog whistle.

From the very outset of his political career, John Howard has focused on the issues of race. Although almost losing his leadership dream in 1988 due to racist remarks made regarding Asian immigration, Howard not only managed to survive and serve an 11-year term but also managed to do so whilst employing a more covert, but essentially identical agenda. Howard had learned from his mistakes and he now possessed a great understanding of the average Australian voter (Campbell 2003, 7). The newfound knowledge rewarded Howard with his first taste of victory in 1996, defeating the Australian Labor Party (ALP). To many (Cavalier 1997), Howard's win in the election was widely attributed to a backlash against Paul Keating and the ALP government. This view gave Howard very little credit and was not the case. This paper will examine how, more significantly, Howard had already put in action a deeply divisive and racialised platform from which the Liberal Party would base its policies in both the desire to secure and later maximise power.

John Howard was seen as a safe choice for Prime Minister. In comparison to Keating, Howard was 'attractively boring' (*The Age* 9 June 2007). However, as Bertrand Russell (1951, 164) wisely noted:

Our great democracies still tend to think that a stupid man is more likely to be honest than a clever man and our politicians take advantage of this by pretending to be even more stupid than nature made them.

Australia would soon realise the truth in Russell's statement. Howard may have been 'attractively boring' but he was a determined and driven leader. John Howard's electoral successes came about as a result of meticulous planning and execution. In the aftermath of the 1996 Federal election, it was suggested (Manning 2006, 283) that poor economic

policy choices played a major role in the downfall of the ALP. This offers John Howard very little credit as a politician and in retrospect, sorely underestimated his political ability and tenacity. Indeed, upon closer examination, one becomes aware that Howard extended those same policies but without electoral retribution demonstrating his political capabilities. Thus, rather than attributing Howard's 1996 electoral win to bad ALP campaigning, it becomes necessary to understand the real reasons behind Howard's success. As a result, one becomes aware that attributing Howard's longevity to political opportune or an ineffective opposition is highly flawed.

As a testament to his talent, John Howard is rarely recognised for his skilful manipulation of Australia. Although claiming to be "Burkean conservative" (Howard 2002) his mastering of dog-whistle and wedge politics highlights his willingness to employ deeply divisive and shrewd political strategy. The aim of the dog whistle is to mislead and fragment the political message propounded (Young 2004, 229) whereas wedge politics aims to split the opposition party's support base, by exploiting an issue that will divide targeted groups of voters (Wilson and Turnbull 2001, 220). Howard's aim in employing the dog whistle was to slice up the electorate. In order to maximise his power and to ensure incumbency, John Howard knew that he needed to sideline the Opposition. Howard realised that by presenting an image of a decisive Government and utilising wedge politics, he could force the Opposition into an untenable position. Preventing "illegal immigrants" from reaching Australian shores, dispatching the Navy to 'protect' Australian borders and deploying the military to 'save' abused Indigenous children are just some of the 'dog-whistles' that Howard sounded in his quest for electoral dominance. Statements such as these when unleashed on an unsuspecting Australian public create a climate of fear ensuring that the voting public relies increasingly on the government. More importantly, Howard learnt to how to secure his position by never becoming the main target – he mastered the art of blending in (Collins 2000, 23).

The Tampa 'Crisis'

From as far back as Federation, Australia has always harboured fears of invasion and despoilation from outside forces - from the 'yellow peril', 'red menace' or the 'hordes' from the North (MacCallum 2002, 14). Importantly, much of this fearful sentiment still exists within mainstream Australia. Although largely irrational, this fear has continued to exist despite knowing that since 1788, no Australian public figure has ever been assassinated, Australia has never been invaded and has never experienced a revolution (Jupp 2007, 9). Howard's success eventuated in that he understood the fears of the mainstream perfectly while outwardly rejecting the accusation that Australia is still an inherently racist country (Campbell 2008, 4). It was Howard's deep understanding of the underlying yet unspoken fears of the Australian people that provided an ideal platform for the Howard Government to push through deeply racist political policies in an effort to secure electoral victory. In order to understand how race has become such a powerful tool for John Howard in contemporary Australian politics, it is important to understand that race issues have always played a large part in the Howard government's policy.

Race has always dominated Howard's personal political ideology. During his early years in parliament, Howard remained silent on the question of Apartheid in South Africa and

spoke out against the Liberal government's plan to ban all sporting links with South Africa until the end of Apartheid (Hastings 2008). Moreover, in 1985, Howard argued (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 December 2005) against those who supported economic sanctions against South African apartheid. In fact, Howard has never been supporter of increased immigration or multiculturalism. He personally felt that multiculturalism prevented Australians from celebrating a common culture and a shared ethos stating that (Henderson 1990, 164): "...So we have to pretend that we are a federation of cultures and that we've got a bit from every part of the world. I think that is hopeless." Furthermore, while Howard was Leader of the Opposition, he suggested that the rate of immigration should be slowed down to satisfy the majority viewpoint:

"If [the level of Asian immigration] is in the eyes of some in the community too great, it would be in the interests of social cohesion if it were down a little so that the capacity of the community to absorb were greater" (Collins 1991, 302-3)

This outlined Howard's personal belief in an overt manner and as a consequence, many (Jupp 1995, 221) criticized Howard for his comments and for being too racist. Although it was a low personal point, it was here that Howard learnt a valuable political lesson. In future interviews and speeches, Howard would be careful to express similar viewpoints in a more covert manner in an effort to conceal his real race agenda. Rather than to inflame public opinion for a second time, Howard had learned his lesson and avoided the multiculturalism issue entirely on the 1996 election campaign (Jupp 2002, 139).

Howard's ambivalent attitude towards race did not lay dormant for long. In 1996, soon after he became Prime Minister, the coalition government imposed a new set of restrictions that focused on race. Firstly (Jakubowicz 1999, 106-17), the Howard government increased the difficulty of immigration to Australia. Family reunion laws were made tougher, the costs of processing were increased, and welfare payments became subject to a two-year waiting period. This was just the beginning of Howard's race game. Howard's next targets would be refugees arriving on Australian shores by boat.

As a land surrounded by sea Australia is no stranger to boat arrivals. Indeed, the first so called 'boat people' were Vietnamese refugees who sought asylum in 1976 (MacCallum 2002, 47-8). However, lagging behind significantly in the electoral polls, Howard needed an issue that would secure the coalition government another term in office (Roy Morgan Polls 21 August 2001). Howard knew that this was an opportunity to play the race card, a move that would resonate with the majority while sidelining the ALP. The arrival of the *Tampa* presented Howard with the perfect opportunity - to demonise genuine refugees while simultaneously inflaming and exploiting the fears of the Australian community. MacCallum (2002, 47-8) argues more strongly, stating that the arrival of the *Tampa* allowed Howard to avoid a 'pre-emptive strike'. Moreover, he suggests that had the *Tampa* not arrived on the shores of Christmas Island, Howard would have created it.

Howard knew that his political longevity depended on his ability to win back majority support and correctly realised that the simplest way to do this would be to create a climate of fear. As he understood the deep underlying fears of mainstream Australia,

Howard was able to deliberately objectify the minority (asylum seekers) and push through deeply racist policies that eventually earned him another electoral victory. Fear was created through the use of dog whistle terms, renaming the refugees as 'boat people', 'illegal immigrants' and 'queue jumpers'. This effectively portrayed the refugees as invaders, and as the enemy (MacCallum 2002, 25). This paper contends that in reality this threat of invasion was pure fiction. Rather Howard deliberately sought to employ a covert race agenda. This idea is merited when one considers how actual illegal immigrants (usually Anglo-Saxon) were not targeted in the Howard campaign. Ironically, those who had violated the conditions of their visa or disappeared from government view were not regarded by the Howard government as invaders or dangerous even though they were avoiding Australian authorities (MacCallum 2002, 25-7). Indeed, had the government's real aim been to stem people smuggling or to prevent so-called 'illegal immigration', one would presume that those fleeing from the authorities would be of primary concern. However, for the Howard government, this was not so. Rather than focusing governmental efforts on restricting visa violations, the government chose instead to target refugees who freely surrendered to Australian authorities upon reaching Australian shores (MacCallum 2002, 25-7). Therefore, one must ask why Howard chose to marginalise and objectify asylum seekers if there was no genuine threat to the Australian people. It seems that Howard's racialised agenda had resurfaced. Although silenced in the overt sense, covertly Howard still wanted non-European immigration to slow down, he had simply learnt to be more discrete in his methods.

This covert approach was tested on August 21, 2001, when the Norwegian container ship, *MV Tampa*, rescued 433 mostly Afghani asylum seekers off the *Palapa*, an Indonesian fishing boat that had sunk just outside Australian waters (MacCallum 2002, 11). A political standoff ensued when the *Tampa* was refused anchorage in Australian waters at nearby Christmas Island (Marr and Wilkinson 2004, 9-45). Rather than attempt to negotiate a humanitarian resolution to the Tampa crisis, the Howard government prepared and legislated a Border Protection Bill that would protect public servants from prosecution and legally expel any boats from Australian waters (Marr and Wilkinson 2004, 9-45). The Border Protection Bill provided served two purposes. Overtly, it demonstrated to the Australian public that the Howard government was quickly and decisively able to act on issues that would affect the Australian public. Covertly, it was able to employ wedge strategy, allowing Howard to exploit divisions within the ALP and fracture its support base. Had the ALP chosen to oppose Howard's stance on 'border security' it would have lost voters fearing an invasion. Therefore as expected, the official ALP stance toed the government line with Beazley (2001) declaring that "we will persist with all the mechanisms the government has in place at the moment" thereby allowing the coalition to accuse the ALP of political incapability.

Arguments in support of Howard's policy have contended that a tough stance on border control (such as that employed by Howard) was necessary in preventing future potential immigrants seeing Australia as a 'soft' target and an easy migration destination (Switzer 2003). Moreover, it is argued that eventually, a line would have to be drawn or the currently manageable problem would spiral out of control (Flint 2002). Although these arguments add weight to Howard's actions, they seem overly pre-emptive. The arrival of

the refugees on the *Tampa* could never seriously be constituted as an attack on Australian sovereignty or the security of the nation. Moreover, it seems foolish to suggest that the arrival of the *Tampa* would initiate a chain of events that would culminate in an unmanageable influx. Instead, it seems more likely that this was an example of Howard utilising the dog whistle to manipulate the Australian public. As Rundle (2001, 17) suggests, Howard's ability to manipulate the situation with such ease and sureness meant that the majority Australian public inevitably believed their country was in danger, creating a climate of fear. Howard's exaggeration of the 'threat' posed by asylum seekers ultimately sought to promote highly contentious and racially motivated rhetoric that would further stigmatise and marginalise those seeking asylum. This stigmatisation would enable Howard to utilise divisive wedge politics, forcing the Opposition into an untenable position, ensuring his own political longevity.

Following the *Tampa issue*, Howard was portrayed as being strong and steadfast during a crisis and as a leader who would not yield to those trying to destroy the traditional Australian way of life. His firm stance won him much support and the polls showed that for the first time in many months, Howard's approval rating soared (Rundle 2001, 3-5). As polls conducted by Roy Morgan Research (25 September 2001) showed, the polls following the Tampa incident found Howard's approval rating jump to 41 percent equalling the ratings previously held by the ALP. Moreover, comments by voters supported the government's stance stating (Roy Morgan Polls 25 September 2001): "John Howard showed great strength in the boat crisis". Howard had correctly assessed public opinion. Previously he had made the mistake of being too overt and had subsequently been accused of promoting racialised policy. Now politically wiser, he was not about to let it happen again.

Howard's covert racialised agenda was exemplified in the 'crisis management' of the *Tampa* incident. Howard ensured that the media were refused access to the scene of the maritime ordeal. No story, other than the official government line, would make it to press. Moreover, the Howard government stipulated that no images or personal humanising stories would be released to the media (Burnside, 2008). The government's version of events, along with accounts in newspapers, television programs and talkback radio fanned Howard's racial agenda (Rundle 2001, 6). Howard's aim was to ensure none of the Tampa survivors would get close enough to apply for asylum or to dispel the myth that they posed a serious threat to Australian security. This was an astute political manoeuvre by Howard. Experience has shown that once the public realised the asylum seekers posed no threat to their security, the public would empathise with the refugees ultimately weakening support for government policy (MacCallum 2002, 33).

John Howard's 'border security' dog whistle had drowned out the legitimate reasons for refugees to seek asylum in Australia. In the absence of legitimate reason, the Howard government invented the myth that asylum seekers were 'queue jumpers' (Mares 2002, 133) shopping for a better lifestyle. This dog whistle term spread the idea that while some of the asylum seekers may have legitimately been persecuted and thus genuine refugees, they had jumped ahead in the line to the detriment of other patient, long-suffering refugees who were still calmly queuing for their turn (MacCallum 2002, 27). Moreover, it

(MacCallum 2002, 43) suggested that many were not suffering or escaping political persecution but were rather shopping for a 'better lifestyle' or seeking 'back door' entry. Supporters of coalition policy who argue against the notion that the Howard government was pandering to racism contest this idea. Rather, they assert that a strict border protection policy ultimately ensures fairness, arguing that lawful asylum seekers must have priority over unauthorised arrivals (Flint 2002). Harries (2002) argues further questioning the real motives of those on the *Tampa*. He states that many who criticise coalition government policy have neglected to mention that the *Tampa's* arrival on the shores of Christmas Island was the result of a serious crime – intimidation of the ship's Captain by those he had just saved, inevitably forcing him to turn away from Indonesia and towards Australia. Although true, this is a huge simplification. Rather than suggesting the actions of the asylum seekers were mutinous in nature, the incident should be seen as a last ditch effort brought on by desperation. Unfortunately, when such ideas are perpetrated by a voice of authority, credibility is given to the fears of the majority essentially guaranteeing that asylum seekers will be both stigmatised and marginalised.

Another myth perpetrated by the Howard Government was that underground members of the Al-Qaeda network and other terrorists could be among the boatloads seeking asylum (MacCallum 2002, 56). This is similar to the viewpoint propounded by Flint (2002) who argued that without strong border policies, Australia would soon become a prime target for criminal gangs. These claims are not only dangerous they are false. As Maley noted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Secombe 16 July 2005) fears over terrorist networks gaining access through these means are unfounded. Terrorists are usually citizens or arrive with valid visas and are rarely, if ever, found on leaky boats carrying women and children. Rather than promoting societal progression and social cohesion, these myths only serve to further ingrain a sense of fear in the Australian mainstream. One must recognise how Howard has exploited these fears in his attempts to maintain power. As the climate of fear became commonsense, Howard (Rundle 2001, 3) displayed his strength and leadership by declaring, "Those people will never set foot on Australian soil...Never". Howard as master of political double-speak then appealed to the morality of the general public (Marr and Wilkinson 2004, 76): "Of course, we are Australian. We don't behave barbarically ... but our generosity should not be abused." The *Tampa* incident clearly demonstrated how Howard had played the race card. The Australian public, caught in a climate of fear, looked to Howard for strong leadership and a tough stance on 'illegal' immigrants. With the ALP effectively providing no opposition, the public already had the answer to which party should win the election.

The Howard Government's draconian approach to asylum seekers had strong public support. In fact, the coalition government's popularity rose significantly during the crisis (Bradford 2001). In a speech given in this period, Howard 'dog whistled' a new national xenophobia with the sentiment (Markus 2001, 47): "we decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come". Howard was portrayed by the media (especially talkback radio) as a hero, staying calm in a situation where the 'floodgates' were about to open and the 'hordes' were about to descend on Australia. It is important to note here that although Howard's policies were deplored by prominent figures on both sides of politics, the majority of the Australian public supported it (Hugo 2002, 38). This

majority support underpinned Howard's success. In the end, Howard won the 2001 federal election as voters saw him as being stable and calm in a crisis (Errington and Van Onselen 2007, 301-5). Moreover officially, the ALP provided little opposition. However, one question that remained unanswered was the truth. Was there ever a 'Tampa crisis'? Or was it an invented, manufactured crisis in which Howard as the national leader could display his resolve and decisiveness to win an election? Howard may not have used racialised language in this case, but he calmly and systematically exploited the issue by using covert, 'dog whistle' terms. Howard claimed to 'protect' the community from this 'influx' and heroically defended Australian borders against allegedly dangerous and desperate 'boat people' (Marr and Wilkinson 2004, 9-45). Although in reality, Howard fanned latent xenophobia and actively pursued racism ultimately securing the majority vote.

It has been argued (Melleuish 2006, 8-17) that Howard was employing an 'ends justify the means' strategy and the hard-line approach was shrewd strategy used to deter other asylum seekers from undertaking the same perilous journey. Although plausible, one must ask why this issue arose so close to an election and why other unauthorized boats were never subject to such extraordinary government action. Moreover, if a 'hard-line' approach was all it took to prevent further asylum boat mishaps, and illegal people smuggling, why had this not been implemented earlier? And not just in the Howard government but by previous Prime Ministers? Considering these questions, it seems that the Howard Government was not employing a final strategy, rather he had strategically planned to use illegal immigration and border control as wedge issues in the upcoming election (Ward 2002, 21-39). More tellingly, before the *Tampa* even became an issue, the coalition had already decided that illegal immigration would be used as an election issue (Ward 2002, 24). Although Howard may not have supported overtly racial ideology he was one of the first Australian politicians that knowingly and carefully exploited issues of race in the quest for political dominance (Glover 2004, 9-10).

The *Tampa* incident also reveals policy discrepancies. In 1999, the coalition government introduced a system of Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) designed to keep unlawful arrivals at bay (Crock and Saul 2002, 106)). However, these strict measures limiting family reunion, welfare benefits and permanency only served to force more people to risk dangerous sea journeys to Australia, as they had no other legal options (Crock and Saul 2002, 77-8). Therefore arguments suggesting that Howard's border protection policy intended to protect asylum seekers from undertaking perilous sea journeys are flawed. Had the government intended to prevent the horrors of a lengthy sea-journey, it would not have implemented or at least dismantled the TPV system. Indeed, it seems more likely that Howard's real aim was racialised – to keep them out. In this light, it is almost impossible to see the Howard government's policy as anything but an easy way to secure votes (Solomon 2002, 244). As William Maley, stated in the Sydney Morning Herald (Seccombe 16 July 2005), "The Howard Government has never been focused on putting in place a serious border protection policy for Australia". Despite Howard's continual assertion that he would protect the interests of the Australian people, the reality is that his primary aim sought to maintain his political power (Brett 2008, 11). As Howard once stated (*7.30 Report* 12 November 2001), "Can I just say that I've always sought to

maximise the primary vote of the Liberal Party, that's the first obligation of any political leader." Again, it seems that Howard is trying to employ the ends justifies the means argument. However, a more sinister and accurate assessment exposes Howard as a manipulative and power-seeking politician. As Machiavelli (Bonadanella and Mauizio eds. 2005, 60) noted in 1532 "...one sees from the experience of our times that the princes who have accomplished great deeds are those who have cared little for keeping their promises, and who have known how to manipulate the minds of men by shrewdness". In order to secure this power Howard needed a divisive wedge issue, as that is the only way where a political leader can appear stronger than his opponent (Brett 2008, 11). The Tampa episode must be understood as Howard dividing public opinion to his political advantage. Howard successfully created and implemented the wedge to achieve his political goal (Dusevic 2006, 16). The Tampa crisis became a wedge by which the Howard government was able to win a close election. Prime Minister Howard confirmed a racist prejudice that alleged that immigrants threatened the Australian way of life (MacCallum 2002, 41-45).

Emergency Intervention into Remote Aboriginal Communities, Northern Territory

In June 2007, the Howard government declared an 'emergency intervention' into remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory following the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* report (Wild and Anderson 2007). The government mobilised to curb the allegedly endemic sexual abuse of Indigenous children and to "stabilise and protect the communities in the crisis area" (Brett 2007, 51). This paper asserts that this issue shares similarities with the *Tampa* issue and should be seen as a calculated move by Howard in a final ploy to win the 2007 election. Throughout Australian history, the Indigenous population has often posed a problem for Australian governments and policy making. In the past, much effort was made by previous governments to pursue interventionist policies with the intent of eradicating (or at least minimising) Indigenous culture through the imposition of stronger western values (Hollinsworth 2006, 130). By utilising race as a basis for further government policy, it seems that Howard aims to refashion history into a contemporary reality.

General health issues, sexual abuse, substance dependency and welfare problems are not new to either Indigenous or non-Indigenous communities. Indeed, the 2007, *Little Children are Sacred* (Wild and Anderson) report merely built upon previous research focused on Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Government policy published in 1996 (Liberal Party Australia) attests to this stating: "While the majority of Aboriginal people do not drink alcohol or use drugs or other substances inappropriately, alcohol and substance related problems persist in Aboriginal communities and contribute to domestic violence, child abuse and the high level of incarceration". In the following year, Pilger (1999) showed that the Indigenous death rate was higher than that of Bangladesh, a third world nation. Therefore one easily ascertains that such problems do not develop overnight. Rather, the issues affecting remote communities in the Northern Territory are the product of years of governmental neglect (Hill 2007, 2).

From 1996, the Howard Government had blamed the ‘Aboriginal industry’ and community for having incorrect policies (Hollinsworth 2006, 165). The government argued that instead of focusing their efforts on land rights, the Indigenous population should have been more concerned with the basic necessities of health, housing, community services and education (Hollinsworth 2006, 165). Although it can be universally agreed that substance abuse and child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory requires further study, it seems surprising that after 11 years in government, John Howard chose only to respond to this individual report (Altman 2008), although many similar reports had preceded it during his prime ministership. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that the Howard government truly failed to recognise that Indigenous disadvantage could be addressed in such isolated terms. A focus on the immediate and basic issues alone cannot solve the widespread health and substance abuse issues let alone change the social status of Indigenous Australians (Hollinsworth 2006, 166). With the decisive and swift ‘emergency intervention’ mimicking the *Tampa* issue, it becomes more plausible to argue that the Howard Government (Wright 2002, 38) deliberately sought to neglect Indigenous issues until they were needed to support an election issue.

Howard deployed the ‘dog whistle’ in an attempt to invoke a sense of national urgency. It hoped to convince the public that without immediate action, another crisis, like the Tampa, would engulf Australian society. Although not as universally embraced by voters, Howard’s dog whistle was able to create very similar deep divisions. The intervention was criticised by various political leaders from both sides of the political spectrum and prominent members of the public. However, there was also widespread support. Leading ALP members such as then Opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, prominent members of the public such as Noel Pearson and major newspapers such as *The Australian* are just some examples of those who endorsed the stance put forward by Howard. In a response that echoed Beazley’s statement during the *Tampa*, Rudd asserted that he understood the motives underlying the ‘emergency intervention’ and would continue the program if elected (*The Australian* 27 October 2007). Similarly, Pearson (*The Age* 3 July 2007) lent his support to the Howard government’s plan by asking what other alternatives were possible? Moreover, a campaign by *The Australian* suggested that the intervention had the blessing of a large majority of the rural Indigenous population, and more importantly was genuinely solving endemic issues. Kearney (*The Australian* 23 October 2007) noted that since the intervention, many families now had electricity and were guaranteed to have food on the table. Moreover, it was suggested (*The Australian* 27 October 2007) that in another community, women were embracing the invention that had freed them from violence. Similarly, Ravens (*Australian Associated Press* 24 December 2007) noted that school attendance had risen, levels of alcohol fuelled violence had dropped and shelters were reporting a decline in the number of women showing up with black eyes. From this it seems reasonable to conclude that some measures of the intervention have been successful.

One must realise that although these outcomes seem promising, a more thorough examination reveals long-term concerns. The ‘national emergency’ was created even though the *Little Children are Sacred* (Wild and Anderson 2007) report stated that: “There is nothing new or extraordinary in the allegations of sexual abuse of Aboriginal

children in the Northern Territory” (Hill 2007, 2). Moreover concerns over the value of the immediate sweeping reforms have been voiced by leading Indigenous health experts who suggest that the intervention will have no real effect on the improvement of living conditions in Indigenous communities (Havnen 2007, 10). More damagingly, Pat Anderson, co-author of the report stated that the emergency measures taken by Howard had no connection to her findings (*Australian Associated Press* 24 December 2007). This leads one to ask why the Howard government was suddenly so eager to ‘fix’ these extensive problems that had existed for generations. Although it may have been an act of moral resolve or benevolence eleven years too late, it seems more likely that Howard was hoping another ‘wedge’ issue would fracture the ALP’s support base enabling Howard to gain votes for a victorious fourth term as prime minister.

The military-style and the haste in which the intervention has been implemented must be questioned. The Howard government’s immediate strategies included bans on alcohol, limiting the access to pornography, ‘quarantining’ welfare payments, mandatory sexual health checks on Indigenous children and controlling communal land through the imposition of five-year leases (Hill 2007, 3). Although the plans were extensive, the Howard government had neglected to explain how these policies would solve the endemic problems. In the short term it may seem as if endemic problems of substance abuse are eroding, however, if bans on alcohol are applied without long-term strategies to combat substance abuse, it is extremely likely (Havnen 2007, 4) that addicted individuals will be forced underground. Furthermore, when that is combined with restrictions on welfare payments, families are likely to be placed under greater pressure, which would make them more likely to resist governmental help (Hill 2007, 3). Most importantly, one must ask in what way could the acquisition of community land be of any benefit or aid to sexually abused Indigenous children? Here it seems that the long term Howard agenda was essentially a racialised one, where the government sought to covertly achieve its goal of seizing control of land while claiming to improve Indigenous living standards. This case is strengthened when one considers the community of Mutitjulu at Uluru (Ayers Rock). One must wonder what the real aims of the intervention are. Uluru is not just another patch of dust in the Northern Territory, it is an extremely lucrative tourist destination (*Sydney Morning Herald* 27 June 2007). It certainly raises the question of how much this action really has to do with alleged abuses and problems and how much relates to the communities proximity to one of Australia’s richest geological areas (*Sydney Morning Herald* 27 June 2007).

When examining Howard’s dog whistle approach, it is evident that a long-standing Indigenous problem was refashioned into a ‘national emergency’ for the Australian public months before the federal election. It is impossible (Brett 2007, 52) to argue that the deployment of military personnel is beneficial to stemming the sexual abuse of children or Indigenous welfare. Conversely, it seems beyond coincidence that an election was looming and that similar to the *Tampa* episode, swift, and authoritarian action was taken to create the illusion of a strong, unyielding government.

Howard has likened his ‘emergency intervention’ to the American response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (*BBC News* 26 June 2007). However it is obvious that Howard is trying

to create another wedge issue by likening himself to an image of a strong, responsive leader. What Howard neglects to remember is that the 'emergency intervention' was not an act of God and unlike Katrina, did not require immediate assistance. In contrast, the 2007 *Little Children are Sacred Report* (Wild and Anderson) was not the first report that noted the problems of Indigenous communities. The Australian Indigenous population is approximately 2.4% of the total Australian population, yet only 31% own their own homes (compared with 71% for non-Indigenous), unemployment is significantly higher than the national average and Indigenous Australians are almost fifteen times more likely to be incarcerated (Wright 2002, 37). Although these figures seem too large to be accurate, Wright (2002, 38) notes that Indigenous Australians have always been at a distinct disadvantage. Thus, it would be absurd for voters let alone Howard, to believe that the US government would wait 11 years to begin solving the problems of Hurricane Katrina. Although, if Howard is to be believed and the two issues are truly alike, then this is exactly what he has done.

In the Howard government's invasion of remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, the race card was played. The 'dog whistle' was employed to highlight a national crisis that could only be solved by strong political leadership as the government faced another federal election. The reality was that Howard saw a political opportunity that could be exploited by wedge politics, enabling him to maintain a strong bid for re-election in 2007, and he seized the opportunity. Although to the public the policies regarding the emergency intervention in the Northern Territory seemed to have been haphazardly thrown together immediately after the report was publicised, a closer examination reveals that Howard had been advocating similar policy reform for many years. Rather, it seems he chose to wait for the right platform and the right time where he would be able to gain the most political advantage out of another racialised issue. As John Howard said to journalist Anne Summer in 1986 (Currie 2007), "The times will suit me". Howard would prove himself as Machiavellian by creating racial crises that his government could be seen to be solving. Howard's success needs to be understood through his exploitation of divisive and racialised policies and his desire to operate within a climate of fear.

The 'emergency intervention' into the remote communities of the Northern Territory can only be seen as a ploy to politicise and play the race card one more time. Although Howard failed to win the election, it is important to note that the strategy he used mirrored that of the 2001 election. If one analyses the polling data of the 2007 Federal election (*Roy Morgan Polls* 23 August 2007), one will discover that around the same time (August), the ALP was the favourite to win the election despite the ALP suffering public embarrassment over Rudd's strip club affair. Howard, buoyed by the success of previous elections was obviously hoping that the 'emergency intervention' would yield him the fruits of wedge politics – an electoral victory – one last time. Howard did not fail in his attempts to create another race debate however, his downfall was that he misjudged the level of fear he would create. The Tampa ensured his success as the dog whistle terms of 'border protection' echoed in the ears of the mainstream. The 'emergency intervention' failed in that it could not resonate with the majority. As MacCallum (2002, 27) astutely noted "The public, by and large, neither knows nor cares what goes on

behind the razor wire” Howard succeeded in *protecting* Australia from asylum seekers by placing them behind the razor wire. The Indigenous intervention was problematic in that the Indigenous Australians involved were largely already behind the ‘razor wire’, or at least in the Australian conscience.

De Gaulle (Whitman 2003, 50) famously noted: “In order to become the master, the politician poses as the servant” and it seems Howard took this to heart. By positioning himself firmly in the mainstream, Howard made it appear that he worked to ‘serve’ the Australian community, by protecting Australia’s borders and enabling (white) Australians to maintain their way of life. By championing the views of the mainstream, Howard managed not only to distance himself from his political counterparts but endeared himself to the wider public while covertly supporting separatist and racist ideology. Moreover, an analysis of Howard’s political policies reveal that they offer only short term solutions to long-term problems (*BBC News* 26 June 2007). His introduction of TPVs ensured that in the short term, the migration of unskilled immigrants would be slowed. However, in the long term, one could argue that the restrictions would push immigrants to pursue other methods of remaining close to their families, either via leaky boats or by overstaying their visas. Similarly, both the *Tampa* and the ‘emergency intervention’ can be seen as short-term policy. Rather than to ‘serve’ the people by actually attempting to change the Australian political landscape, It seems that Howard’s only long- term policy was to create divisive sentiment in the Australian landscape and to maximize his own political power. From his refusal to condemn South African Apartheid in the early 1980s, to his comments regarding Asian immigration in 1988, to the handling of the *Tampa* and finally through to the introduction of controversial interventionist legislation in the Northern Territory, it becomes apparent that the one definitive legacy Howard left behind was the race question.

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