

# The politics of spin

Michelle Grattan

Although lagging behind the excesses of current US and British spin doctors, Australia's spin industry is growing rapidly, raising questions about the impact of media management on effective scrutiny by journalists of political processes and issues. Political leaders can appear more visible but in fact be less accessible to detailed questioning by informed interviewers, and election campaigns are now dominated by sophisticated levels of media management by governments and oppositions. The rise of spin has had a negative impact on journalism, distorting news processes and encouraging more passive forms of journalism.

**B**eing a good spinner can get you a very long way. In Tony Blair's mid-1998 reshuffle, Peter Mandelson was elevated from Minister without Portfolio to Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and put into Cabinet. Mandelson was head of the publicity machine that was a key in the highly successful Blair campaign. A confidant to Blair, he used news management ruthlessly for purposes within and outside the party.

One account of the rise of Blair and New Labour reported that Mandelson "had no hesitation in making use of his many contacts among political journalists to generate unfavourable coverage for anyone who sought to impede the path of Blair's supporters or was critical of the direction being taken by those who regarded themselves as Labour's modernisers." (Jones, 1997, p.15) An article in

the *Spectator* in 1998 claimed Mandelson was “almost certainly the brains behind” the rescinding of one appointment to the job of political editor at the *Express* — although Mandelson subsequently denied the claim. (Glover, 1998, p.28)<sup>1</sup>

In the US, Howard Kurtz in his book on spin gives this description of Bill Clinton’s former spokesman:

One thing about Mike McCurry, he knew how to play the game. He understood the ebb and flow of the fungible commodity called news . . . McCurry was a spinmeister extraordinaire, deflecting questions with practised ease, sugar-coating the ugly messes into which the Clintonites seemed repeatedly to stumble. He would mislead reporters on occasion, or try to pass them off to one of the damage-control lawyers who infested the public payroll. He would yell at offending correspondents, denounce their stories as inaccurate, denigrate them to their colleagues and their bosses. He would work the clock to keep damaging stories off the evening news, with its huge national audience. Yet with his considerable charm and quick wit, McCurry somehow managed to maintain friendly relations with most of the reporters who worked the White House beat. He would go to dinner with reporters, share a beer, give them a wink and a nod as he faithfully delivered the administration’s line. He was walking the tightrope, struggling to maintain credibility with both the press and the president, to serve as an honest broker between the antagonists. (Kurtz, 1998, p.14)

McCurry must be a role model for the spin trade. Despite this, President Clinton’s troubles seemed to defy the efforts at containment. No wonder that, soon after bowing out in October 1998, when McCurry was asked how he felt about leaving the president’s side, he jumped in the air shouting “Free at last!”

In Australia, our spin merchants look tame beside the likes of the Mandelsons and McCurrys. Tony O’Leary, John Howard’s chief media man, gets into the back of some of the TV shots, certainly not to stand in front of the microphone saying what the PM thinks on this or that. He is not a public figure in his own right as was McCurry. And there is just no Mandelson equivalent on the scene.

But, like the US and Britain, we have our local and expanding spin industry, and that has significant ramifications for journalists and the political process. Talk of leaders as “products” and of the “spin” that helps sell them reflects the modern convergence of the world of politics, entertainment and advertising. As the extensive writings on spin tell us, today’s leaders are not only spoken of as if they were “goods”; they are treated like them, with “packaging” all important.

Image has been elevated, although I must say Australian federal politics is a bit out of sync with the trend at the moment. You only have to look at and listen to Clinton and Blair to see the modern image-conscious politician. But no spin expert could turn John Howard and Kim Beazley into glamour figures (despite periodic efforts to spruce them up — a trim of the Howard eyebrows, a diet for Beazley). They share in common their separate brands of old-fashionedness.

In the era of spin, symbols and style become more important in the presentation of the political message.

Spin is equally about defining and getting out the message — whether it’s how good your team is or how bad the others are — and keeping the politicians, as the jargon goes, “on message”. It is about trying to influence how the media records and reacts to that message. Although spin concentrates a lot on form, it hasn’t, from the politicians’ point of view, meant the abandonment of policy. If it had, John Howard would not have presented the electorate with a GST which, however sugared, was a hard swallow. There is periodic talk about political parties backtracking on various policies. But the issue there is reaction to public opinion. To the extent that spin comes in, it’s when the politicians cast their reaction as being more of a response than it in fact is.

If spin — that is, the highly professional selling of the political message that involves maximum management and manipulation of the media — is at the heart of modern politics, one of its key fea-

tures is an attempt to exert a large degree of control. The federal government has an army of people termed "media advisers" (presumably no longer called press secretaries because adviser sounds more important and the "press" is now only part of the modern media).

The modern media *seems* much closer to the action but actually is more at arm's length. Gatekeepers are everywhere. One reason for this is that ministers' staffs have expanded enormously in the last two or three decades, as have their work loads and the amount of travel they can do in a given week. The numbers of Canberra-based journalists have also vastly grown.

I am always struck by the contrast between now and the Curtin government, when the then handful of senior Canberra journalists had twice daily briefings from the PM, often containing highly confidential information about the progress of the war. Of course there was control in those days too — most dramatically, censorship, as well as the understanding that much of the information being given to the newspapers was not for publication. But a lot more of the "spin" was done by the politicians themselves, although Curtin did have a long-standing and influential pioneer press secretary.

Even if he/she wanted to, the modern minister could not satisfy individually all the demands made for comments, interviews, "grabs". To do so would be to forego doing much else. Some senior politicians, having reached a position where they can get someone to help them with media work, are relieved to lean on that person to a huge degree, because they feel protected that way. The media adviser becomes a security blanket. Or to change the metaphor, the politician ends up like a caged animal, fearful of the jungle out there.

So modern "spin" is partly a function of everything, including the political job and the media, becoming bigger and more demanding. And also more sophisticated and complex. This is double sided. There are more opportunities for promoting political mes-

sages (the growth of the electronic media, and political advertising). And the media itself has become a technological world that makes special logistical demands on politicians, so that they in turn require around them those who understand the world of television in particular.

Brian McNair, in a contribution to the book *Media Ethics*, describes the interactions of the players in the modern political process in terms of three groups competing in a game:

The politicians and the journalists compete to set the news agenda . . . The spin-doctors act as coaches and managers on behalf of the politicians, and as technical assistants in realising the desired communicative effects. We, the voters, are positioned as spectators, with occasional walk-on parts. At the end of each electoral cycle we are asked to choose whom we think has performed best during the preceding period, and who is likely to perform best in the forthcoming one. (McNair, 1998, p.62)

McNair takes a benign view. He acknowledges the excesses: politicians lie, journalists can be too confrontational, spin-doctors “overdo it with threatening faxes and bullying phone calls”. But he argues people should remember, if they think we overdose on politics now, that a century ago women did not have the vote and politics was a more elite, unscrutinised sport. And if the spin doctors are sometimes over the top it is encouraging “how often we come to know about these abuses of the political communication machinery”. (McNair, 1998, p.63)

The late Henry Mayer, addressing advertising executives after the 1980 election, had the message that what we would now talk about as one aspect of spin is inextricably bound up with what politics is. And Mayer had his own “spin” on the politics-as-product idea. He said:

[P]olitical advertising is necessarily full of deception, half-truths, exaggerations and falsities. It is that way because all forms of politics are that way, but political lies are not like lies about soap or cornflakes. Politics does not deal with “products” which can be checked and evaluated in the way a car can be . . . If worried enough to care, you can compare brands of

soap or toothpaste in terms of some hard criteria. But there is no possible way you can compare soft appeals which rely on fantasy, pride, ego-boosting, fear or alienation. (Mayer, 1994, p.119)

Mayer argued that the idea of political deception is much less simple than that of deception in many other fields. "If you found a way to make all political advertising rational and accurate, or even if you improved its rationality and accuracy greatly, what would you have to do? . . . You would have to *eliminate politics as we know it*. (Mayer, 1994, p.116)

These are useful reminders not to get too carried away by the evils of spin, although of course Mayer was speaking before the spin doctors had taken the equivalent of PhDs in the tricks of their trade. In a study of political communication in Britain, Bob Franklin observed that in the '80s, "politicians became increasingly enthusiastic about the possibilities of using media as vehicles for presenting themselves and their policies . . ." Indeed, this enthusiasm 'became obsession as politicians tried to influence and regulate the flow of political information and messages' and politicians and policies became "packaged". (Franklin, 1994, p.4)

I think there is a considerable risk in the fact that the spin process is often accompanied by a high degree of cynicism. The trouble is that the "spin cycle" can produce a "circle of cynics."

Cynical spin merchants, working for cynical politicians, give a line to cynical journalists. The public decide if all these players treat them with such disdain, they will return the compliment, and become alienated from the political process. Why did the punters leap to Pauline Hanson's defence when she was attacked by journalists, or given a hard time by interviewers, even though she might be inarticulate and perform badly? In part because, I think, she was seen as somehow outside the "spin" game, the amateur in the world of hard-bitten and cynical professionals.

Both politicians and journalists rate near the bottom in public opinion polls. In addition, the trust that people feel for government

is very low. Politicians' breaking of promises, and journalists' concentration on the cut and thrust, often awarding marks for a clever and successful try-on, have added to the distrust and the disgust.

So spin is an artform for the players, but increasingly a problem for the system. What are some of the manifestations and consequences of spin?

Spin means that leaders' exposure to the media (and indeed the exposure of ministers and the Opposition leader) is staged-managed to a high degree. John Howard holds few news conferences. He appears instead in television and radio interviews. Much of the press writing about political leaders is based on the transcript, rather than on face-to-face questioning.

Howard is simultaneously over-exposed and under-available. He is all over the media, but that doesn't mean he is accessible to answer media questions from other than those on whose programs he has decided to appear. What sections of the media can get to him depends on where the spin operators think the advantage lies. It might be an application of the free market, but there is certainly no journalistic level playing field when it comes to prime ministerial access. This approach (adopted by Keating as well) tends to devalue the policy content, or at least subject the content to less rigorous or intellectual analysis. It can mean issues fail to get teased out and the debate can proceed in an unsatisfactory series of half-bites.

Politics is pushed more to theatre and the journalists to theatre critics (or more precisely, television critics). Of course Parliament has always been theatre, but there was more non-theatre politics. Television has extended the politics of theatre and indeed made Parliament the side-stage on which the actors are briefly seen during the nightly news bulletins.

The effect of excessive spin is to have everyone — the politicians, the staff, and the media — concentrate heavily on the straight politics, the tactics, rather than the substance of policies,

especially in the public presentation. This means journalists may often assess parties, governments, oppositions, on whether something is politically street smart, rather than sound policy. (Sometimes, it must be said the journalists go to the other extreme; they judge against some impossible ideal, expecting from politicians herculean feats. This sort of unreality can also give the political process a credibility gap.)

Emphasis on tactics can mean the journalists worry less and less about getting across the policy detail: they concentrate on the surface, on how this or that policy will 'play'. And this becomes self-reinforcing. If a journalist gets into the habit of writing analysis mainly in terms of the votes in it, he/she is unlikely to suddenly move into looking at the issues from a more substantive standpoint.

As in so many areas, what's happening in Australia follows the US trend. In "Spiral of Cynicism" Cappella and Jamieson highlight studies showing how coverage has moved from issue-based stories "to ones that emphasise who is ahead and who is behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead." They conclude that:

strategy coverage is not just an aspect of media coverage of politics but is becoming its dominant mode. From 1988-92, horse-race coverage of election events on the nightly news rose by 8 per cent from 27 per cent . . . Tracking polls accounted for another 33 per cent. Policy coverage was down from 40 per cent in 1988 to 33 per cent in 1992." (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, p.33)

One of the most noticeable areas in which spin has increased in recent years is in the parties' handling of election campaigns. A quarter of a century ago, news organisations would have a couple of senior people travelling with the leaders; they'd swap caravans once or perhaps twice in the campaign. The leaders would, besides their speeches and appearances at functions, have one or sometimes two press conferences a day. Issues would bat back and forth from day



to day. It was hard for a leader to escape fairly forensic interrogation.

Now the campaign days are staged like musicals, with plenty of sound, pictures and distractions. The doorstep format of the modern campaign press conference can make for instant escape if necessary. The sit-down news conferences are the exception, and only come when the leader wants to make an announcement or feels he can score best by having one. The journalists jump on and off a caravan and so often are not following for an extended period what the leader has said on a particular matter.

The way a leader and his team play the spin game can vary between campaigns. For example, in 1987 Labor's strategy was to get Hawke each day against a good background for the evening news. He was very inaccessible for questioners. In 1990 when Hawke was trying to prove he had more substance than Peacock, the "spin" approach actually included lots of full news conferences. In the 1998 campaign, both John Howard and Kim Beazley mostly had daily doorstops, in an election program that featured heavily talkback radio programs. The usefulness of the doorstops were, however, reduced by the increasing tendency of senior journalists not to follow the travelling caravan. In particular, the senior television correspondents now stay in Canberra, feeding questions to their more junior reporters on the road. This can sometimes lead to a sort of competition in "spin" as the political spinners and the TV correspondents put their respective glosses on the news.

Spin has always been there in modern politics to a degree but one of the features of the '90s game is how fast it is played, especially in election campaigns. The coming of the mobile phone and fax (and now E mail) has transformed campaigning, and will continue to do so. It is a game of action and reaction. A politician is loose-tongued; strategists on the opposing side remember a contradiction; they rush to the files and dig out the relevant quote; journalists on the campaign trail are rung and faxed.

Spin, you see, requires a very good filing system, and a very good monitoring procedure. Under Labor the so-called “aNiMaLS” (National Media Liaison Service) became notorious. Everything said by the Coalition was monitored over all the country. Government representatives provided a constant stream of transcript to the press gallery. The Coalition, in Opposition, attacked the “aNiMaLS” and promised to abolish it. The service they have introduced in government is rather more discreet in its public face — there are some but many fewer transcripts delivered to journalists — but an extensive “listening” and propaganda machine remains.

Successive governments complain how their predecessor has used public money and staff to “spin” their case, whether it is flooding the market with the message, or discrediting their opponents. But, whatever changes are made when a new administration gets power, each abuses the system. A recent example was the Howard government’s \$17 million advertising to sell the tax package, which clearly did not fall within normal definition for advertising information about government programs.

One of the manifestations of spin is the leak. Leaks can be divided into at least two categories: material that gets out in spite of the desire to keep it secret, and material that is put out with a specific purpose.

The same “leak” can fall into both categories — depending on where you’re coming from: for example, the Opposition gets hold of a secret document and secretly gives it to one journalist to launder it. This is a double leak, both a leak from the government and then a leak from the Opposition.

Labor played this game when in 1997 it leaked material on travel resorts involving a Howard government minister, John Sharp, to journalist Laurie Oakes, partly for impact, but probably particularly to protect sources. Somebody in the bureaucracy leaked the information to Labor in the first place.

John Howard and Peter Costello and their offices have over the last few years, in opposition and government, periodically leaked material to a certain Canberra-based columnist.

In leaking, the leaker can hope to get a certain "spin" on a story, to get heightened exposure for it, and perhaps to make the journalist somewhat obligated to the leaker. A leadership aspirant sometimes seeks to build a useful future relationship with a significant journalist by providing that journalist with "leaks"

Spin can encourage lazy journalism and distorted journalism.

Lazy journalism when the spin factories of Opposition or government do the work for the journalists — the carefully-assembled research on a scandal, or the bundle of budget PR material — and the journalists come to rely overmuch on these factories. Or, having accepted a genuine product from the factory, to then take at face value a later product of inferior grade. For example in the frenzy of bottom-of-harbour stories of the early '80s, some innocent people found themselves the subject of unfair allegations because everything the Labor Opposition pushed out on the subject got a run.

The spin process can lead to distorted journalism when "lines" on this or that are uncritically accepted, and become orthodoxies, or when the fashionable spin is strong enough to discredit what might be an alternative, well-based position.

Of course the distinction between what we are calling spin and the usual process of political persuasion is an artificial one. Was Paul Keating, when he was selling his plan for a consumption tax to the press gallery in the mid-'80s, best described as ardent persuader (what politicians are supposed to be) or spin doctor par excellence? The spin merchants are usually defined as the intermediaries, the professional salesmen, but some of the politicians are masters of the spin game. Keating's spin came with the classic techniques:

promises and threats. Buy it and you would be “on the drip”; reject it and no drip, and probably a lot of abuse.

The federal parliamentary press gallery is especially easy territory for the spin doctors because so many journalists are collected under one roof — almost all the media reporting federal politics and many of those who commentate on it.

The spin merchants’ power is heightened because they control a substantial slice of the “talent” as well as the information, and both are in short supply. For instance, the Sunday TV interview shows *must* get a politician each week, and compete fiercely for them. Which show gets the PM, or the Treasurer, at crucial times is important to the vying networks (Channel Nine usually wins the contest), and this can give the relevant spin merchants considerable influence. One small example: this writer was vetoed from a TV interview panel by John Howard’s press secretary because he preferred others (even though this was done without the knowledge or authority of the PM). As British journalist Nicholas Jones reports: “Government information officers and the media staff of political parties can make life difficult for individual programs or producers through a surreptitious withdrawal of cooperation”. (Jones, 1995, pp.19-20)

One serious drawback of the proliferation of professional spin experts is that they tend to restrict journalists’ breadth of sources. This happens in several ways. The spin doctors’ power, including with their bosses, is directly proportional to how much they control the flow of information. So they will try to restrict access to those with the “primary” data — their own bosses (if they are ministers; this happens less in Opposition but is not unknown); experts on the minister’s (or sometimes the shadow minister’s) staff; and the public service.

The public service, increasingly intimidated about dealing with the media, is both discouraged from media contact by the government media advisers, and quite thankful not to have to run the me-

dia gauntlet, even on a background basis. And the journalists, if adequately catered for by the spin experts, have less motivation to seek more widely.

It should be noted that for all journalists talk about or complain about the political spin doctors, we ourselves practise the art. Just watch those two minute round-the-political-world news broadcasts, with the cynical tag lines. Or the way whatever happens tends to be interpreted according to a currently fashionable view of the world, which can vary from “Howard is a disaster” or “Labor can’t win”, to a broad framework such as the economic rationalist mantra.

Let me end on the story of the rise and rise of one spin man. Many of these people are journalists, some out of the Press Gallery. But this one used to work in Sydney PR, mainly, as he put it “flogging pet food and chocolates.” He had Uncle Ben’s Mars Bar account. And yes, he does speak about the “product” — its name is Kim Beazley.

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## Endnote

1. Mandelson resigned as Trade & Industry Secretary in December after being accused of breaching the Blair government's ministerial code by not declaring a substantial home loan from a parliamentary colleague.

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