

Media influence in politics

by Tyson Pink, political layman with Opinions

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While, like some 50% of the Australian population, I'm bitterly disappointed in the result of the 2019 Australian Federal Election, a significantly larger number must be incredibly surprised, as well. Opinion polls had Labor winning on a margin of around 4%. Newspoll's two-party preferred polls had Labor ahead since June 2017. How, then, could it all have gone so horribly wrong for those of us who saw Labor's vision for Australia?

While there are many aspects in play—politicos, pollsters and laymen alike will spend the next few days, months and years pulling it all apart—it's clear the right-wing media's incessant negative coverage of Bill Shorten and the Labor team, boosted by even left-leaning news corporations, contributed to the miasma that was this campaign.

Johan Lidberg, in *The Conversation*, drew comparisons between Labor 2013 and the Liberals in 2019. Both had disposed of sitting prime ministers, three apiece (notwithstanding Labor shifting Kevin Rudd twice), and suffered years of obvious disunity and division. However, this time around there were no 'Kick this mob out' style headlines splashed across News Corp front pages. The Liberal/National Coalition agenda of tax breaks for corporations suits Murdoch much better than Labor's proposed crackdowns on corporate tax loopholes. News Corp's bias is demonstrated best through its Sky news channel, though thankfully its current audience reach is modest at best. *The New Daily's* John Stapleton found that negative comments about Labor and their policies were seven times more likely than those criticising the Coalition. Conversely, Pauline Hanson's right-wing racist dog-whistling party, One Nation, barely raised Sky's collective commentator's eyebrow.

In *The Guardian* on 2 April 2019, Amanda Meade managed an entire article ‘reporting’ on the ‘blowtorch’ criticism of Labor’s climate policy by Murdoch’s ‘News’ Corp papers. In it, Meade cites multiple examples of the negative coverage, including quotes from Liberal ministers. It’s disappointing that a news source that prides itself on its independence would so readily repeat these claims unchallenged. Exposing the negativity of this media corporation without offering counter claims or evidence in favour of the policies merely succeeded in providing Murdoch a wider platform by repeating his claims to the *Guardian’s* audience.

ABC News fared little better. When a video of Pauline Hanson claiming Labor had plans to introduce a ‘death tax’—that is, an inheritance tax—appeared on social media, conservatives jumped on it. The ABC’s insistence on using the ‘death tax’ term only succeeded in promoting the idea, despite articles rejecting it. Labor candidates claimed the issue dogged them for most of the campaign. The same occurred with the Labor’s proposed changes to dividend imputation, which would stop individuals—primarily self-funded retirees—from receiving tax refunds despite paying nil tax in that financial year. This change would have affected a small portion of the wealthy population. The Coalition quickly branded it a ‘retiree tax’ despite it being nothing of the sort, and the phrase was repeated in papers across the nation. This was a deliberate attempt to muddy the waters, with the Coalition knowing full well that enough people wouldn’t fact-check the claim. That many voters in the 65+ age bracket turned away from Labor in droves suggests this was successful.

Clive Palmer, of the United Australia Party, is also claiming his scare campaign was responsible for the Queensland swing against Labor. Scare campaign it was, as despite considerable rules around who, when and where political advertising can occur, there’s actually no requirement for any of it to be factual. Without challenge, Palmer’s ads slipped by with claims that Labor would add an extra trillion dollars in taxes, which is a pretty impressive feat given the Australian GDP is barely a trillion itself. Palmer’s \$60 million advertising campaign failed to net his party a single seat, and was branded as a failure by some. After the fact, Palmer claims this was the plan all along; disrupt the Labor campaign and harvest preferences for the Coalition. Palmer, of course, believes he got exactly what he paid for: Liberal preferences mean the government

owes him a favour, and he anticipates he'll be rewarded with approval for a Queensland coal mine to rival Adani.

Were we lied to by opinion polls? Yes, and not for the first time. Australia has suffered its own Brexit. We've now got our own Trump, properly elected this time and not slipping in from behind, Steve Bradbury-style. We've elected our own smiling assassin: "This is my leader, and I've got aspirations for him," said Scott Morrison while patting Malcolm Turnbull on the back, 48 hours before emerging as the new leader of the Liberal Party, and thus, Prime Minister. Granted, it was a difficult visual for Bill Shorten to escape as well, having played a significant part in the disposal of two sitting Labor prime ministers, so it was an angle he was loathe to pursue. Will we trust pre-polls again? Probably not, but we'll still cautiously listen to them in the absence of better predictors. Who would have guessed that predicting the weather would one day be easier than election outcomes?

In Newspoll's preferred PM question, Shorten only once, barely, emerged as preferred prime minister – in August 2018 when the Liberals axed Turnbull – so the media constantly reminded us of how disliked Bill Shorten was. Katharine Murphy, also in *The Guardian*, often cited this as evidence of Shorten's unpopularity across the nation. Was this just throwing oil on the fire, fuelling the mob mentality? Leading the witness? Tell people someone is disliked, unpalatable, and they'll likely start to feel the same for fear of pushing against the grain. Morrison ran with this, choosing a presidential-style campaign, instead of fighting policies. He was, to use his obnoxious sports metaphors, playing the man and not the ball. It was easier, and obviously successful for him: he was more liked than Shorten, and the Coalition's only real public policy was defeating Labor at the polls. So successful was this campaign, in fact, that the Coalition has been re-elected without any actual policy platform or vision for Australia. They've been handed a blank cheque.

There's a clear argument to be made here for media to call out politician's lies, rather than just regurgitating them. It's vital that voters read a broad spectrum of journalism, not least of which to combat inherent and systematic biases in media monopolies like News Corp. And there's a clear argument here for regulations around

honesty in political advertising. Palmer outright lied to the community, and these lies directly influenced the outcome. But, more than that, there's a responsibility of the media from all sides to consider their reporting. Reporting another's bias without providing clear alternatives or simple fact checking only serves to compound the issues and amplify the biases. Repeating slogans such as 'retiree tax' and 'death tax' only helped cement them in the minds of voters, despite being easily—if someone was so inclined to check, of course—verifiable as, God help me, fake news.

Until more voters understand the biases in the media networks, and until political advertising is held to some, any, standard of factualness, we've only a facsimile of democracy, bought and paid for by media moguls and failed businessmen.

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