



# the drum



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mcr

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MCR is Queensland's top social research agency, having conducted work for both government and corporate clients for over 15 years. We regularly conduct polling and focus groups to tap into the very latest opinions on the public and community impact of a range of social issues. These include public health matters, the environment, transport, road safety, financial changes and government regulations.

## Welcome to our October edition.

### FOR OUR NEW READERS:

*The Drum is a monthly publication which reports back on the views of a special "public interest" focus group conducted by MCR.*

*The group consists of 8 Brisbane residents who come from all walks of life and a range of Brisbane suburbs. They are aged from their early 20s to their 60s. Each month we get the group together and ask them to discuss a number of "hot" news issues.*

*For previous issues of The Drum you can visit our website at [www.mcrpl.com.au](http://www.mcrpl.com.au).*

## A quick election profile of our respondents....

To ensure a more interesting discussion, we changed the composition of our group this time to reflect voting intentions. We skewed it towards 'swinging' voters who were still making up their mind about how to vote at this election.

The electorates they represented varied – from safe seats like Fadden (Liberal) and Bowman (Liberal), to seats with more narrow margins such as Brisbane (Labor) and Moreton (Liberal).

Their interest in politics varied, but none could be called a political junkie. Perhaps this was best illustrated by the fact that very few knew the name of their local member.

Indeed, none are voting on the basis of their local member. Most are looking at the bigger national issues, as the following discussion shows.

## STOP PRESS

## ELECTION SPECIAL!

**This month we focus exclusively on the upcoming Federal election and all its machinations.**

**We kick off by looking at the profile of our respondents....**

## What they think about the election so far...

There is a general feeling that Rudd is doing well in the campaign. Probably the word that kept on being used most frequently was 'fresh'.

What people are most surprised about is how little Howard appears to be himself. They describe him as nervous, twitchy and defensive, characteristics which they normally don't associate with him. And they're not really sure why. Those who saw the debate were particularly struck by this lack of confidence on Howard's part.

There is a strong sense that Howard is not making much impact with young people. By contrast, Rudd is seen as capturing their imagination. Again the perception is that Rudd is offering something fresh. It may not be better but it's definitely new.

Probably the only headway that Howard is making in the eyes of this group is with the 'union' theme. There is no doubt that this is seen as Rudd's Achilles heel. The small business people and contractors in the group are particularly concerned about what industrial relations will look like under Rudd. They think this will cause a lot of confusion in months to come if Rudd wins.

But despite these concerns they don't think the IR card is enough to pull Howard over the line. The overwhelming feeling is that he's had his time and there's a need for something new.

## "Authorised by" ....What sort of impact are the ads having on their vote?

The group was shown a selection of ads from the Liberal and Labor websites.

We kicked off by showing a general 60 sec ad from each party which focused on the 'What we'll do for Australia' theme.



*Liberal - Go for Growth*



*Labor - New Leadership*

Then to test a different style we showed the Coalition's ad claiming 70% of the ALP frontbench are former unionists. For balance we also showed Rudd's response to this ad.



### And their reactions?

First and foremost, it needs to be said that our group did not feel overwhelmingly impacted by any ad. They believe that ads have a lot to do with the gloss and little to do with spelling out policy.

Nevertheless, of the ads shown, they had a slight leaning towards the ALP ads. There was a sense that the Libs are tripping over themselves by insisting on always having something negative in the ad. The group has a finally tuned antenna for negative statements – and they don't particularly like them.

Some have some particular reservations about talking about Labor's mismanagement of the economy...and not just the Labor supporters. They think it is too simplistic and doesn't take account of the fact that the economy is a complex beast which is greatly influenced by global circumstances.

By contrast, what they like in the Rudd ads is the avoidance of the negative. There is a sense that Rudd is trying to appear honest, ordinary and above all Australian...even if some doubt whether this is totally genuine.

## Policy statements – Do they matter?

We also explored some of the policy initiatives that had been announced throughout the campaign thus far.

Policy is really important to this group. They are looking for the how and why, not just bland promises. But so far they haven't heard the type of policies they are looking for. Even the tax cut didn't really seem to light their fire!

What they want to know about, almost to a person, is what sorts of ideas are out there for improving hospitals, schools and roads. They appear to be frustrated that in a time of economic growth, funds aren't being directed in sufficient amounts to these bread and butter areas.

Even though both sides have made some announcements in these areas, these types of promises are clearly not what our group wants.

They don't just want an education subsidy here and a rescue for Mersey Hospital there. They want big blue sky ideas that will ensure solutions to problems.

In short, they are thinking in terms of Snowy Hydro schemes, not three year terms.

So politicians look out! Maybe the electorate this time round is looking outwards at the needs of the world around them. Could it be that the more inward focus on personal safety and wealth from elections past is no longer in play?

Mind you, possible interest rate hikes may change all this. So we wait and watch.

## What will the post-election future look like?

We asked our group to imagine what Australia would look like in 12 months' time under three different scenarios – a Rudd win, a Howard win and then finally a Howard win but with the leadership being handed over to Costello.

### The Rudd Scenario

There will be a lot of activity going on under the Rudd government in 12 months' time, according to our group.

More than anything he would be involved in working out his IR plan. And quite a number in the group thought this might get pretty messy, given what has to be changed and re-jigged.

But IR is just the beginning. Other envisaged actions by Rudd include ratifying Kyoto, trying to stem petrol prices and making a move on boosting Australia's infrastructure.

Interestingly, quite a few also thought that Rudd will take a consultative approach. Similar to Bob Hawke, it is anticipated that he will be arranging summits and conferences on ways to fix some of Australia's big problems like health and water. Could it be that consensus politics will get another guernsey 20 years on?

On a global note, our group thinks that the likely change to a Democrat president in the US will be very useful for Rudd.

### **And if Howard returns?**

Our group looked hard into that crystal ball when it came to Howard and what did they see in 12 months' time? Nothing. Well almost nothing. It was a complete contrast to the activity of Rudd.

'Same old, same old', is how one respondent summed it up. Maybe a focus on the economy, but that's about it. A little harsh, probably. But it shows again how strongly this group believes that Howard is a spent force and the well of ideas has truly dried up.

And we need to point out that these people are not necessarily anti-Howard. It's just that they're weary of him.

### **And the verdict for Costello?**

These respondents wasn't quite sure what to say about the Costello scenario. Most believed that he would have to spend most of his time establishing himself and getting the Australian people to know him. Beyond this PR activity, they weren't able to predict much about the shape of a Costello Government.

## **And who will win?**

Labor, Labor, Labor, say our group, when polled in a secret poll. Perhaps not a surprising result given their comments throughout the session.

In a separate exercise, we got them to focus on why, if the polls are right, Australians feel like a change.

This was an interesting discussion because it sorted out what it's not about. For example, it's not about Rudd being a better proposition. Nor is it about Howard being a bad PM or being too old.

What our group clearly states is that it's about change for change's sake. It's about wanting freshness and new ideas and new energy.

If this does prove to be the case then Howard may live to regret that he didn't leave the job when he was still on top.

Maybe those Ancient Greeks did know one or two things about hubris!

***As we approach the end of the year and our final upcoming The Drum, we welcome suggestions from our clients for what topics they might like covered in future issues.***