

Truth and trust

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This election will be about trust. Who do you trust to keep the economy strong...to keep interest rates low...to lead the fight on Australia's behalf against international terrorism? John Howard

I can agree with the Prime Minister in saying that the election is about trust, and people don't trust this Government any more, with good reason. Mark Latham.

From day 1 of the campaign, trust has been identified by both Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Mark Latham as a key election issue. For Christians this seems like a heaven sent opportunity to talk about what really matters during the campaign – questions of character and values rather than which party will improve my standard of living.

But what do they mean by trust? Howard says it is about his record. Trust me to continue to deliver a strong economy, a safer nation. For Latham, it is about not being a liar, deliberately bringing to mind Howard's children overboard remarks just prior to the last election.

Does this emphasis on trust mean that we should expect our political leaders to always tell the truth? For many it seems incongruous to mention truth-telling and politicians in the same breath. Recent polls confirm the solid support this view enjoys. However, polls are also showing that being slippery with the truth, and even lying, do not result in a politician being considered untrustworthy.

In one poll 60% of those asked believed Howard lied when he said asylum seekers travelling to Australia by boat had thrown their children overboard to facilitate reaching their destiny. Howard has long had the ironic nickname "Honest John". Yet polling is also showing that Howard remains equal with Latham on the question of trustworthiness.

A puzzling outcome? There could be a number of explanations. Perhaps some of those polled think it is OK to lie for a (higher?) purpose like winning government so as to be able to implement your policies. Or perhaps a specific incident of lying (as alleged in relation to the children overboard matter) is insignificant enough to shift opinion. Or maybe being generally dependable allows certain particulars to be forgiven.

But a more fundamental aspect of our political culture is revealed by the pollsters' figures.

Contemporary western society lives with a paradox: on the one hand it is believed that reality is not fully comprehensible, that truth is therefore inaccessible and that this inaccessibility is ultimately unimportant. On the other hand, there is tacit agreement that certain values are expected to be maintained, like concern for the environment, or enabling higher standards of living. It is this paradox which also allows a disconnection between trust and truthfulness. Howard and Latham are seeking regularly to foster an image of trustworthiness, obviously out of belief that it is an important value for uncertain times. But is it just an image, or is there substance behind their approach? Can we really trust our political leaders?

Image is sometimes equated with sham, the act of creating a picture to deceive. However, image is a substantial means by which we understand reality. We are created in God's image. It is embedded in our God-given life and culture. Although we filter images through our own lens of belief, upbringing and circumstances, we also pride ourselves on not being deceived, knowing that anything we see or hear is a mediated, constructed reality. And this is nowhere more the case than in our democratic election processes.

Ever since President Nixon realised in the 1950s that "concern for image must rank with concern for substance" all Western politicians have become increasingly adept at presenting images, aided and abetted by the widespread infiltration of television into our lives.

Perhaps our addiction to the visual image gives us a way of coping with the complexity of issues. We may long for greater certainty about policy issues and the best solutions for them, but again paradoxically, all we know for certain is that we don't know the best solution. And so creating the appearance that someone is in control, knows what is best, and can be trusted to do it, is often enough for us.

Political symbols have always been important. Often the need to be seen to be doing something has ranked with the substance behind such symbols. We expect politicians to appear on TV and calm our fears after terrorist acts. We want them to promise that interest rates won't rise, even though they know politicians don't have much control over them. In fact so great is the modern reliance on image that it has become synonymous with spin. It is sometimes said that this is the cause of politicians losing our respect. However, I think such cynicism carries with it a deeper message of dissatisfaction about the way God has in fact made us – as beings who necessarily interpret, who don't have clear access to truth in the world.

In the era of the visual image words are used and spoken for the sound-bite, carefully generated from focus-group truisms. The similarity of the slogans and clichés coming from the major parties is ample illustration of the potency of our desire for image, perhaps even over substance. We want them to say the things that are dear to our hearts. They heartily oblige.

As Christians we agree that there is no one Christian position on most issues that will be raised during the campaign. It may be thought that one or the other major party's positions has more merit on the facts. And as pointed out in last week's SIE brief, it can be hard to choose who to vote for when no party or candidate perfectly reflects our biblically attuned thinking on the issues. So should we bother wrestling with the issues at all? Does it ultimately matter which party wins when most positions they take differ only in a matter of degree – as long as Christian values are upheld by the winners? As long as the right *image* is conveyed?

This is a position that Christians have sometimes taken – to elevate values above the issues at hand as a way of obtaining greater clarity, more certainty about how to decide on election day. It has much to commend it but like all human initiatives to improve our conduct of world affairs, even earnest resort to values can be used for other ends. Both Latham and Howard are no doubt using the word trust and our image of what it means to suit their own interests. Agreement on its importance does not guarantee unity on its definition. It is clear that a resort to values won't bring back the certainty of more optimistic times, an era long ago transformed into cultural ambiguity about not only the meaning of life, but also the meaning of words. The common word trust will be spoken throughout the campaign, but voters will still believe different things when they hear it.

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Sources:

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