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Election Campaigns, Tourism Press Coverage, and the Australian Labor Party: A Case Study of the 2007 Australian Election

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According to the authors of tourism textbooks widely used in Australian higher education institutions in the past two decades, tourism is 'a widely dispersed economic giant' (Weaver & Oppermann, 2000: 3), that 'has become increasingly important to Australian society since 1945, whether one measures its importance in political, economic or social terms' (Caroll, Donohue, McGovern, & McMillen, 1991: vii). Hall (2007: 2) argues 'Tourism is now widely regarded as one of the cornerstones of the Australian economy' and 'one of the key mechanisms for regional economic development and for the generation of employment'. Tourist travel and tourism development in Australia are in fact uneven but widely dispersed in safe to marginal seats across the country. The so-called 'tourism industry' employs hundreds of thousands of workers (and voters), and 'is represented by one of Australia's leading CEO networks', the Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF), whose 'members employ over 450,000 people' (Tourism and Transport Forum, 2008). If scholars and industry representatives are right, and tourism is such an important part of contemporary Australian society, tourism should attract media attention during government election campaigns.

The election campaign strategies of political parties are often designed around enhancing a candidate's chances of victory, as 'Parties formulate policies in order to win elections rather than win elections in order to formulate policy' (Downes, 1957, cited in Parsons, 1995: 221). During election campaigns, political advertising and news coverage inform voters of party policies and other matters (Hollander, 2006; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and help them evaluate 'the parties, issues and leaders in making their vote decisions' (Denemark, Ward, & Bean, 2007: 91). Because of voters' reliance on the media for political information, media strategy and coverage are important considerations for candidates during election campaigns.

Print, broadcast, and more recently, electronic media serve as the primary vehicles through which political candidates communicate with their publics (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2004). The release of policy proposals during election campaigns was carefully timed in order to gain maximum media attention, and newspapers, for example, are a rich source of political information during such campaigns. Research concerning newspaper coverage of election issues has addressed a broad range of election topics (for example, Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Hollander, 2006; Jones & Fledman, 2006; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Papadakis & Grant, 2001), however, media coverage of tourism during Australian federal and State government election campaigns has not previously attracted scholarly attention. This paper presents a pilot study to begin to address this gap.

On October 13, 2007, former Australian Prime Minister and then leader of the Coalition government, the Hon. John Howard, announced Saturday November 24, 2007, as the date Australians would go the polls to elect the next federal government. Under the leadership of Mr. Kevin Rudd, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Coalition. This paper examines press coverage of tourism as a policy platform for the ALP during the 2007 federal election campaign. Coverage in two newspapers, *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, is analysed.

The Australian and *The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* were selected because these broadsheet newspapers 'tend to offer more detailed political analysis than their tabloid counterparts' (Hollander, 2006: 571). The *SMH*, published in Sydney, had a Monday to Friday average daily circulation of 212,700 and approximately 364,000 on Saturdays during 2007, making it Australia's largest broadsheet newspaper. *The Australian* had a Monday to Friday average daily circulation of 133,000 and approximately 299,500 on Saturdays (Australian Press Council, 2007).

At the request of the authors, *Media Monitors* (a media intelligence company) conducted a preliminary search for tourism related articles during the campaign period, and subsequently recommended use of the following search terms from the headline and/or article text fields to minimise the capture of irrelevant material: Tourism policy OR Tourism White Paper OR Tourism Australia OR Tourism and (ALP OR Labor OR Kevin Rudd). *Media Monitors* conducted a second search using these terms, and identified 53 articles, 42 of which were considered valid for this study. The authors then retrieved the corresponding full text articles using the Dow Jones Factiva database.

Articles were analysed using content and textual analyses. For the latter, a process of open, axial and selective coding (Neuman, 2006) was used to categorise articles according to their relevance to the 2007 election campaign. Articles were subsequently coded using SPSS, and a summary profile of the articles based on themes and codes was generated.

Of the 42 valid articles analysed, 45.2% were directly related to the election campaign, while 54.8 percent were non-campaign related. Only 26 percent ($n=11$) of all articles directly mentioned tourism and discussed tourism issues. Of the campaign-related articles ($n=19$), only three directly addressed tourism, with the remainder ($n=16$) comprising 'incidental' mentions of tourism, for example, through reference to a Minister's portfolio. Of the non-campaign-related articles ($n=23$), eight made a direct mention of tourism issues, but most of these were general references to either Tourism Australia or tourism niche markets such as spa resorts.

In addition to the content and textual analyses of the newspapers, it is worth noting that the search terms 'tourism policy' and 'Tourism White Paper' (the medium to long term tourism strategy released by the Howard government in 2003) returned not a single result. The search also returned little evidence of political lobbying by industry groups throughout the campaign period. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the recently delivered Federal Budget, opposition Members of Parliament have noted the Rudd government's apparent disregard of Australian tourism as noted in a recently published quote from the shadow minister for tourism: 'What we've seen in this Budget is that tourism simply isn't a priority for the Rudd Labor Government, despite it being a key economic driver of the Australian economy' (Ciobo, 2008).

The focus on only two newspapers means these results cannot be generalised to other media or across Australia. Moreover, the papers selected do not have a strong focus on specific electorates. Nevertheless, the findings of this pilot study suggest tourism barely raised a ripple in media coverage of the ALP's 2007 federal election campaign and associated strategies. With issues such as industrial relations and WorkChoices, health, education, income taxes, food prices, and rising interest rates at the forefront of election polls, perhaps, too, tourism was not perceived by the ALP as a policy arena capable of yielding any significant election advantage.

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