

Howard put trust in inner circle's strategy

Poll-sensitive he may be, but still the PM decided on a contentious central plank to his campaign platform. Samantha Maiden reports from the war room

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WHEN John Howard chose trust as the central issue on the first day of the campaign, many just didn't get it.

Howard had been painted by Labor as a serial liar, indeed pilloried by cartoonists and protesters as a lying rodent.

But the Coalition's inner circle of strategists -- chief of staff Arthur Sinodinos, political adviser Tony Nutt, Liberal Party director Brian Loughnane and pollster Mark Textor -- at a meeting at The Lodge starting at about 3pm on Saturday, August 28, the day before the election was called, decided trust was the best bet to tackle Mark Latham's assault on the Prime Minister's integrity.

Throughout the day the Coalition's leadership group, including Treasurer Peter Costello, Defence Minister Robert Hill, Finance Minister Nick Minchin and National Party leader John Anderson, had been on by the phone to Howard.

Textor had already outlined the strategy in an interview with Jennifer Byrne published in The Bulletin just three days later.

Redefining honesty as a "technical thing", he outlined an argument that voters didn't care about who said what to who about the children overboard affair as long as they could trust the Prime Minister to make the right decisions on the economy, interest rates and protecting the nation against terrorism.

Textor, who spent the campaign waking at 3am to crunch overnight polling and going home to bed not long after the 6pm news, also let slip another secret: while the PM is accused of being "poll-driven" he doesn't always take the advice.

"Everyone remembers the times when Howard's followed the polls, but fails to remember the times when he hasn't," he explained.

"The privatisation of Telstra, the GST debate, various stages of the Iraq conflict, where, while he's been sensitive to public opinion, he hasn't necessarily followed it, he's taken his own way. I remember him saying publicly once, 'When I announced the GST I think my polls had a heart attack'."

And so on the day he declared the election the Prime Minister declared: "This election will be about trust."

"Who do you trust to keep the economy strong and protect family living standards? Who do you trust to keep interest rates low? Who do you trust to lead the fight on Australia's behalf against international terrorism?"

It was a trifecta that the Prime Minister was to return to again and again, except perhaps during the week Liberal strategists complain he went "off message" on pre-emptive strikes in the region, attempting to look hairy-chested, but came under fire from the region and the ALP.

But the trust message came under fire the same day as Textor's interview appeared in The Bulletin, as Liberal senator George Brandis was forced to deny he described the PM as a "lying rodent".

It was an image that caught on like wildfire, resonating in the same manner that the fishnet stocking will forever haunt Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. The strategy remained clear however: to confront and tackle and disarm the ALP's attacks that Mr Howard was a liar, who "couldn't lie straight in bed" according to Latham, let alone tell the truth to the Australian public.

It was also to reinforce negatives about Latham identified by voters themselves -- he was erratic, emotional, a behavioural policeman, an anti-choice, mandatory Mark.

At the Coalition's campaign headquarters at 101 Collins Street in Melbourne scores of staffers had from the first week tracked media and developed policy -- there was \$6 billion for the PM to spend in one speech after all. Two rapid-response teams worked on strategy, one responding to Latham camp stumbles, the other identifying Coalition mistakes and hosing down campaign blunders.

Perhaps the most curious element of the Coalition's campaign came in the final week with the decision to bombard homes with a recorded message from the Prime Minister, sparking hundreds of complaints to talkback radio, letters pages and Coalition and ALP offices.

On the eve of the campaign, Labor polling in marginal seat electorates suggested a whopping 25 per cent of those surveyed had copped a recorded message from the PM -- many being forced to pay for the privilege when they retrieved the message from their mobile phone's voicemail.

A clear majority of those who were phoned, 70 per cent, said they were extremely annoyed and 22 per cent said the phone calls made them less inclined to vote for Howard.