A history of government advertising in Australia

Sally Young

Australian governments have advertised since their inception. Public service job vacancies, government contracts and tender applications continue to be routinely advertised and, when state-owned utilities were common, governments also advertised services such as telecommunications, transport, banking, and gas, water and electricity. There are also periodic events which require heightened government advertising to promote and explain events such as a forthcoming election, a census or a referendum.

Aside from these routine advertising functions (the government calls this ‘no-frills’ or ‘non-campaign’ advertising), governments also choose to run more expensive advertising campaigns which centre on a particular theme and require specific funding allocations. These ads attract the most attention when studying government advertising. This is because ‘campaign advertising’ requires the government to have sourced and allocated a substantial amount of funding for a specific promotion. The campaigns therefore reveal a great deal about the priorities of the government of the day.

In the 1800s, for example, there were large-scale immigration campaigns which tried to encourage white Europeans to migrate to the Australian colonies. Later, during the two world wars, government advertising increased dramatically and was used as part of a key plank in government communications strategies. Since then, governments have continued to run large-scale advertising campaigns on topics as diverse as health, safety, recreation, tourism, employment, tax and industrial relations.

This chapter focuses on the history of Australian government advertising from 1899 to 2005 by outlining major government advertising campaigns. During the 20th century, there is a shift from wartime propaganda to ‘social marketing’ to promotional advertising and finally, in the mid-1990s, to a
series of highly controversial advertising campaigns which critics claim are ‘partisan’ and designed to advantage the incumbent government.

**GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING, 1899–1969**

Selling Australia as an immigration, and later, a tourist, destination has been a recurring theme in Australian government advertising for over a century. A poster from the immigration agent for the Queensland government in 1899 encouraged ‘emigration’ to Queensland by boasting that ‘the climate is healthy... the soil is... rich and productive... A splendid system of National Education prevails throughout the colony which is absolutely free to all classes.’ Glowy posters from the 1920s encouraged British immigration by promising ‘employment guaranteed’, ‘good wages’ and ‘plenty of opportunity’.

During the two world wars, government advertising became far more central to government communication as it was the key method for defense force recruitment and morale-boosting campaigns. In wartime advertisements, there were patriotic entreaties for citizens to enlist, to work together, to undertake labour to support the war effort and to purchase war bonds (Figure 12.1).

In World War I, recruiting posters used nationalistic appeals about the ties of Empire as well as calls to mateship and masculinity (‘Be a man! Enlist today!’). As Peter Stanley notes, the recruitment posters of this war ‘represented the most insistent and bitter campaign of persuasion which Australia has ever seen’. By 1918, with the Australian government ‘desperate for recruits’, the posters focused on the ‘spectre of the extremely remote, if not fictitious, threat of a German invasion of Australia’ using graphic imagery and depictions of barbarian Huns.

After these propaganda posters and the publication of definitive works such as Harold D. Laswell’s *Propaganda Technique in the World War* in 1927, the design and content of government advertising began to attract more scrutiny. This intensified during and after World War II, when the propaganda used in Nazi Germany and other authoritarian states drew attention to how government communication could be used to lie and as a tool of social control. Arising from this, one of the major concerns about state-produced advertising at the time was its effect on the audience and its potential, phrased in the crudest of terms, to ‘brainwash’ citizens.

In Australia, during World War II, the government advertising process was formalised with the creation of the Commonwealth Department...
of Information, which was responsible for censorship and for producing propaganda such as leaflets, posters and radio and cinema newsreels to disseminate government messages. The coordinated use of government advertising in World War II led to important shifts.

World War I, but more particularly World War II, encouraged a normalisation of large-scale government advertising and a heightened recognition on the part of government officials about the ways in which advertising could be used. It was no longer restricted to routine and mundane purposes, such as communicating basic government services, or seen as a purely commercial activity, but rather as a major tool of government persuasion and indeed, manipulation. Government advertising was now recognised as a method for influencing public opinion and inducing specific behaviour: a way of convincing people to enlist in the armed forces or buy war bonds, for example.

Along with these changing perceptions about the nature of government advertising came a greater willingness to spend more on it. The climate of opinion was such that more government expenditure on advertising. There was also, as Robert Crawford has pointed out, a new blurring of the boundaries dividing [wartime] commercial advertising from state propaganda.

For example, Robert Menzies' government was at first wary of taking up an offer of assistance from the Association of Australian National Advertisers (AANA) because it felt the aims of commercial advertising were different from those of Government publicity in wartime and feared being associated with the sort of 'distrust and cynicism' that many members of the public felt towards commercial advertising. However, this reluctance subsided and greater cooperation ensued. The AANA donated advertising space to the government. It also recommended that the government centralise advertising (previously separate branches of the armed forces had run their own recruitment drives). In response, the government created the Commonwealth Advertising Division.

World War II therefore spurred a number of developments in government advertising. There was a blurring of the distinction between commercial and government advertising practices, including closer cooperation between commercial advertisers and the government. There was a recognition of advertising's social as well as commercial usefulness. There was far greater spending on government advertising and a new centralised system for producing and distributing advertising. These are all features which continued after World War II and, indeed, are still apparent today.

The continued convergence of commercial and government advertising, for example, continued in glossy postwar campaigns to promote immigration. Government ads in the 1950s and 1960s showed iconic images of sun-browned Australians and promised 'a British way of life' in Australia with its 'famous climate' and 'high standard of living'. In the UK, billboards, newspaper advertisements, leaflets, posters and film spots were used to advertise the Assisted Passage Scheme to Australia, which cost adults £10 (those who took up the offer were therefore dubbed 'ten-pound Poms'). The advertising campaign was considered to be highly successful, with over 2.4 million British migrants arriving in Australia between 1950 and 1969.

THE 'MODERN' ERA OF GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING, POST-1970s

Large-scale war and immigration advertising campaigns set the foundation for later mass government advertising campaigns dating from the 1970s and particularly after 1974. During this period, there was a series of Australian government advertising campaigns which in cost, longevity and content are the major government advertising campaigns of the past three decades. Many Australians still recall some of these ads. While some used graphic and shocking images, others celebrated, promoted or used humour to get their message across (Table 12.1).

SOCIAL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

Following path-breaking empirical studies on media effects by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in the USA, the complexities of media and communications effects became more apparent in the 1940s and 1950s and the older simplistic 'brainwashing' theories were repudiated. State and federal governments also moved away from concerns about the sinister potential of government propaganda, and instead began to identify advertising as a potentially positive way of addressing identified social problems.

This occurred particularly from the late 1960s when there was a developing theory of 'social marketing' which suggested that advertising could be used for the good of society and to bring about 'life-improving social change'. 'Social marketing' advocates the use of commercial marketing techniques to try to 'sell' a social change (rather than a product or service) to members of the public as a way of improving society. It often tries to achieve social goals such as increasing personal safety, improving health or reducing discrimination or littering.
Table 12.1  Major government advertising campaigns in Australia, 1977–2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Topic</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Reported cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life: Be In It</td>
<td>1977–81</td>
<td>$4 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance Australia</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>$4.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy Australian</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>$1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yul Brynner anti-smoking ad banned in WA</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>A US advertisement. It cost the WA government $20 postage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Made</td>
<td>1986–1994</td>
<td>$15 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS (Grim Reaper)</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>$3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(National Advisory Committee on AIDS)</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>$10.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Vicarian government)</td>
<td>1990–</td>
<td>More than $15.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense force recruitment</td>
<td>1991–2004</td>
<td>$166.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Nation</td>
<td>1995–96</td>
<td>$94.4 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Tax System – the GST</td>
<td>1998–2000</td>
<td>$118.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>('Uncle My Heart')</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Tobacco Campaign</td>
<td>1997–</td>
<td>$2.5 million (federal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>('Every Cigarette is Doing you Damage')</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>$2.1 million (states/territories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic referendum</td>
<td>1998–99</td>
<td>$28.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough on Drugs</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>$19.5 million (as at 30 June 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National security campaign</td>
<td>2002–</td>
<td>$26 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(anti-terrorism)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>$26 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening Medicare</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>$15.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-smoking youth campaign</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>$25 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Relations</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>$35 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Costs are in nominal figures (as at the time).

1 'Life: Be In It' was originally produced by the Victorian government from 1974 to 1977. Federal government funding was removed in 1981 and the campaign was then run as a non-profit initiative funded on a fee for service basis.
2 The private sector also contributed $18 million in marketing.
3 At the time of writing, there were reports the government was preparing to spend over $100 million on this campaign.


Figure 12.2  'Life: Be In It'. 1989. (Reproduced with permission of Life Be In It International Pty Ltd.)

In the 1970s, a number of churches, charities, museums and other non-profit organisations began using marketing personnel to meet objectives such as fundraising or increasing memberships, and they began to use techniques such as advertising. Marketers at the time argued that advertising could contribute to the enrichment of human life through improved marketing of educational, health and religious services, better utilization of natural resources, and enjoyment of the fine arts.17

Then as now, marketers expanded their belief that marketing is as relevant to government and social service agencies as it is to profit-seeking organisations, without elaborating why this was necessarily so or considering the broader implications of state-produced advertising. They usually focused on writing how-to manuals littered with marketing concepts and jargon such as 'developing a marketing plan', 'identifying potential target markets' or 'establishing a price'.18

Their success in propagating these concepts was evident when governments began to create targeted advertising campaigns drawing on the principles of social marketing. Among the most famous of these in Australia are the 'Life: Be In It' campaign, the Grim Reaper AIDS advertisement and the 'Quit' (anti-smoking) ad.

The 'Life: Be In It' campaign was one of the first major coordinated attempts at using government advertising for social marketing purposes in Australia. 'Life: Be In It' featured the iconic cartoon character 'Norm' who encouraged Australians to 'live more of your life' by getting off the couch, eating better, drinking less and participating more in sport and recreation. The Victorian Government began the campaign in 1975 but it was so popular that the federal government took it up in 1977. But by 1981, the Lynch Committee 'Razor Gang' had cut out $750 million worth of federal
funding and this ended federal government support. The organisation then moved to a privatised fee-for-service model, which allowed the campaign to continue. The ads have run free to air for over thirty years and are increasingly on the internet.

By 1987, the benign, light and affirmative cartoon approach of Norm in 'Life. Be In It' had been supplemented by a more dramatic, confrontational and negative style of government advertising.

The Grim Reaper AIDS advertisement broadcast in 1987 has been called 'probably the most successful advertising campaign ever run in Australia.' This campaign aimed to raise awareness of AIDS when it was a new phenomenon and the television ad is one of the best remembered of all Australian advertisements (it is also discussed in Chapter 13). The ad showed a Grim Reaper figure in a bowling alley striking down men, pregnant women, babies and crying children. The 60-second ad included the image of a pregnant woman and her baby being hurled into the air after being knocked over by the Grim Reaper's bowling ball. There were also close-up shots of people lying dead, eyes open, after being knocked down. It was award-winning but also highly controversial. Advertising agent Simon Reynolds, who created the Grim Reaper image, says Australians' vivid recall of the ad is remarkable given that it 'was actually shown for only two weeks' as an advertisement.

Using similar shock tactics, the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) ads, which began in Victoria in 1989, aimed to reduce the road toll by showing graphic images of car accidents, trauma, death, injuries and grief in order to change driver attitudes and behaviour. The TAC aimed to `promote awareness that “this could happen to me” through the use of an emotive, realistic portrayal of road crashes and their consequences.' Campaigns have targeted speeding, drink-driving, mobile phone use, young drivers and fatigue. One of the most well known was the 'If You Drink Then Drive, You're a Bloody Idiot!' campaign. The TAC argues that the ads played a major role in halving Victoria's road toll. They were judged to be so successful in improving road safety that they were sold to other states in Australia as well as to other countries including the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Fiji and South Africa (their actual success is discussed in Chapter 13).

There have also been a range of anti-smoking campaigns which have been graphic in their depiction of the damage caused by smoking. As with the TAC advertisements, some of the hardest-hitting ads came from Victoria and the state’s ‘Quit’ campaign. Victoria’s first anti-smoking television campaign went to air in 1971 with black and white advertisements.
By 1985, advertising showed a sponge full of fur being wrung out into a glass jar. Other ads showed the clogged aorta of a smoker as well as the camera chasing smoke down a human throat accompanied by the slogan ‘Every cigarette is doing you damage’. Recent campaigns have shown the slicing of a smoker’s brain to reveal a bloody clot or graphic images of damaged lungs, eyes, and heart.

Western Australia has also been at the forefront of anti-smoking advertising. In 1985, the WA government produced an ad showing a ‘death clock’ which recorded the number of smoking-related deaths every minute. This provoked an outraged response from tobacco companies and made the front page of the *West Australian* for two days running.24

One of the most memorable anti-smoking ads was made in the USA and featured the actor Yul Brynner four months before he died of lung cancer. The WA government paid just $20 postage to have this ad shown on television, but the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal prohibited its broadcast because of foreign content restrictions in place at the time. The government appealed the ruling and the ensuing media attention was ‘priceless’ as the ad was frequently replayed on nightly news programs.26

Until 1997, state governments had been creating different anti-smoking advertising campaigns, but in that year, all state and territory governments, along with community organisations such as the Quit Campaign and Anti-Cancer Councils, joined forces and combined funding to create a National Tobacco Campaign which coordinated advertising across Australia.

**PROMOTIONAL ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS**

Australian governments have also produced campaigns which have social aims but use a more promotional style. From the 1920s to the 1980s, various governments have used advertising to appeal to Australians to buy locally made goods. This theme has appeared in several different campaigns over several decades and with bipartisan support.

In the 1920s, the federal government appealed to national pride to ask Australians to buy locally made goods rather than imported ones. In the 1960s, this theme was revived via a joint federal government Australian Chamber of Manufactures campaign which argued that if Australians bought Australian-made goods, ‘our money will automatically come back to us’.

In 1979, lobbying by the Australian Manufacturing Council saw the campaign revived again by the Fraser government in its ‘Advance Australia’ campaign. It began with an initial $2 million grant from the Department of Industry and Commerce that was later increased to $4.5 million.26

In 1983, the then Minister for Industry and Commerce, Andrew Peacock, launched a $1 million ‘Buy Australian’ campaign, describing it as helping to ‘speed Australia’s economic recovery’. When Labor won office in March 1983, the policy was basically retained and the advertising adapted into a ‘Buy Australian’ campaign funded by the Industrial Design Council of Australia and the Department of Industry and Commerce.27

In 1986, the Hawke Labor government launched a new ‘Australian Made’ campaign, with the patriotic jingle ‘Hey True Blue’, sung by Australian artist John Williamson. At this time, Australia was facing a balance-of-payments crisis and the campaign attempted to change Australians’ shopping habits so that they would buy locally made products. The ads were devised by John Singleton (who went on to produce the ALP’s election advertisements the next year, 1987, and continued as the ALP’s ad agent until 1996).28

While both major parties, when in government, had established or maintained ‘Buy Australian’ campaigns, the content of the ALP government’s 1986 campaign began to provoke some criticism because it was so heavily associated with the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, and appeared to be particularly nationalistic and ‘ockey’. Images in the ad included Anzacs, shearing sheds, farming, surfing, cricket, athletes in Australian tracksuits, a range of Akubra-wearing Australians, babies eating Vegemite and men fighting bushfires. Critics were dismissive, for example, of its ‘simply simplistic emotive lyrics’.29

The lyrics include the lines: ‘Hey True Blue, don’t say you’ve gone. Say you’ve knocked off for a smoke [Australian slang for a rest break] and you’ll be back later on . . . True blue, is it me and you? Is it Mum and Dad? Is it a cockroach? Is it standing by your mate when he’s in a fight? Or just Vegemite? True blue, true blue, I’m asking you.’

In the television commercial, Australian actor Jack Thompson said (over the top of the jingle): ‘Next time you’re shopping, I don’t ask or imagine for a moment that you’ll race in and buy a product for the reason that it is Australian-made alone. But I urge you to at least stop and compare the Australian-made article with its overseas competition.’30

While, at one level, the ads seemed to have a social marketing purpose (to encourage people to ‘buy Australian’), their heavy dose of patriotism meant they were also celebratory and festive at the same time. The campaign was more promotional in style than the usual social marketing ads warning about health and safety matters.
Because the 'Australian Made' campaign was aimed at reducing Australia's economic woes in relation to imports, and because of its content and the large amount of money allocated to it, this campaign was scrutinised by different criteria from those traditionally applied to the other less controversial social marketing campaigns. There were questions about whether the ads were necessary and whether they could realistically achieve the aim of encouraging Australians to buy locally made products. For example, critics lampooned the campaign for aiming 'to appeal to people to go against their common sense and disadvantage themselves financially by backing the local [product] for the sake of the country'.

The Hawke government's tourism ads were similarly patriotic and celebratory. In the 1980s, tourism became a key priority when the government appointed to Cabinet the first minister to handle tourism, John Brown. From 1983, ads used the comedian Paul Hogan, who starred in the movie *Crocodile Dundee* in 1986, to promote Australia as a tourist destination in the US and UK markets. One ad saw Hogan chuntered next to the America's Cup telling Americans that if friends ask you where Australia is, 'Tell 'em it's where the America's Cup is'. But the most famous saw Hogan asking 'Why don't you slip another shrimp on the barbie?' and was so heavily broadcast in the USA from 1986 and considered so successful in raising tourist numbers that it has been called 'the big bang of Australian tourism history' (this is discussed in the following chapter).\(^{55}\)

Created by Sydney agency Mopus, the ads promoted a sense of Australian identity based more distinctly on the Australian outback image. They also focused on sporting imagery as well as Australia's natural heritage and famous landmarks such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Like the 'Australian Made' campaign, the tourist campaign also hovered between social marketing and promotional styles. It seemed to address a social problem (lack of tourism and the potential to create more jobs and a stronger economy through tourism growth). But the ads were also very commercial in nature, selling the Australian nation and the tourist experience. The campaign included not only advertising for the overseas market, but also domestic ads which aimed at making sure that, once tourists arrived, Australians lived up to the promise of friendly openness that the ads had promoted. For example, Jill Barnes describes a domestic ad in which Hogan asked Australians 'not to make a liar out of him' and to 'flash their pearly whites and to say hello to a visitor' because tourism meant jobs.\(^{56}\)

In the 1990s, new tourism ads were created using golfer Greg Norman after Hogan complained that the ones he had made in the early 1980s had been played ad nauseam. These ads were more 'urbane' and 'sophisticated' and some were aimed at the Japanese market. Various authors have analysed how Australian tourism advertising draws on particular conceptions of Aboriginality,\(^{57}\) represents Australia as a land of 'paradise and adventure',\(^{58}\) and how it has impacted on notions of 'Australian'ness and Australian identity overseas (see also Chapter 13).\(^{59}\) These strands of promotion have their roots in the very early campaigns to encourage British immigration described at the beginning of this chapter.

While the 'Made in Australia' and tourism campaigns appeared to be more promotional than previous government advertising, the Australian bicentennial campaign in 1988 was particularly celebratory in nature and was quite controversial. It attracted criticism, and not only from indigenous Australians, who held peaceful protests to draw attention to what the event really commemorated—their dispossession.

The government spent $200 million on the bicentenary and over 30,000 events were held in celebration throughout 1988.\(^{60}\) It was an expensive policy and the accompanying advertising campaign was outside the accepted 'social marketing' mode. It was not about health issues or prevention or an information campaign on an area of social need. The ads were about celebrating an event in Australian history and promoting the government's planned activities to commemorate the occasion. The campaign therefore signalled a shift away from social marketing and towards advertising which had a 'feel-good' emphasis that was of some political benefit to the incumbent government. In other words, this campaign pushed the boundaries of what had previously been deemed to be acceptable in government advertising.
It is also significant that there were very clear similarities between the Hawke government’s promotional advertising and the ALP’s party-political election ads in the 1980s (including the Singleton link). Ads often, for example, relied heavily on images of Australian identity accompanied by a patriotic jingle. 29

The promotional campaigns of the Hawke era were not in the mode of the traditional paternal government advertising which seeks to protect citizens from their own bad behaviour such as smoking, drink-driving and sun-bathing. Aside from trying to achieve seemingly measurable objectives such as increasing tourism or purchasing local products, they were also about maintaining social cohesion and the promotion of intangible beliefs and values about Australian identity and the role the incumbent government was playing in Australian society. 40 In retrospect, the ‘Australian Made’ and biennial campaigns were the precursors of a new style of government advertising.

CONTROVERSIAL ‘PARTISAN’ CAMPAIGNS

While there were criticisms of the graphic nature or the content of the message in government ad campaigns such as the Grim Reaper, TAC and anti-smoking ads, the rationale and the social need for such campaigns (to educate citizens about the dangers of AIDS, reckless driving and smoking) was widely accepted. This does not mean that the advertisements were always greeted uncritically, but there was no real outcry from opposition parties or from the public. Generally, the identified social problem was accepted as such and the ads were viewed as an attempt to rectify that problem.

By contrast, the more promotional-style advertisements used during the Hawke era saw a heightened questioning of the cost and content of government advertising, though this was tame compared to the future that erupted over some campaigns after 1995.

WORKING NATION, 1995

In 1995, the Keating Labor government’s ‘Working Nation’ advertisements began to attract an even more strident type of criticism. For the first time, there were clear accusations from opponents that federal government advertising was being misused for partisan promotion.

The ‘Working Nation’ campaign included veteran Australian actor Bill Hunter. The ads aimed to alter negative perceptions about unemployed people and encourage employers to give them a go. They also mentioned government subsidies for employers. However, ‘Working Nation’ was produced and broadcast at a time of high unemployment. In this sense, they were similar to ‘Australian Made’: both campaigns were arguably designed to play a morale-boosting function and soothe the public concern over an issue for which the government had been criticised (the state of the balance of payments in 1986, and high unemployment rates in 1995.

There were also controversial political connections. Just as John Singleton had gone on to create Labor’s political ads the year after the ‘Australian Made’ campaign, Bill Hunter went on a year later to star in Labor’s 1996 election ads, indicating a partisan connection. John Howard, leader of the Liberal Opposition, was very critical of the ‘Working Nation’ ads: ‘This grubby tactic will backfire on the government... Taxpayers will see through it. They don’t want their money wasted on glossy advertising designed to make the prime minister feel good.’ 41

The Liberal Party voiced a number of concerns about ‘Working Nation’. One concerned its timing, as the ads continued broadcasting until just before the 1996 election. Howard argued that ‘Working Nation had been introduced two years earlier, but they were still running advertisements when Keating pulled the plug in January of 1996... In other words, those advertisements ran and ran.’ Howard accused Labor of an unprecedented propaganda blitz using taxpayers’ money. 42

The ‘Working Nation’ advertisements in 1995 were the first time that there was major debate in Australia over a federal government advertising campaign; the debate included accusations by opposition parties that it was unnecessary, partisan in nature and designed to boost the government’s re-election chances.

The ads prompted Howard that same year to make a promise that, if elected, a Coalition government would draw up new guidelines prohibiting government advertising that was partisan in nature and requiring that advertising be approved by the Auditor-General. 43 Once in government, however, this promise was not fulfilled. Ten years later, the Howard government was still using the previous government’s old guidelines from 1995 which had allowed ‘Working Nation’, and some of the Howard government’s own advertising campaigns have provoked even more intense controversy.44 The Labor Party has described some campaigns as ‘nailedly political’ and as ‘government advertising of the Liberal Government, by the Liberal Government, for the Liberal Government’. 45
UNCHAIN MY HEART, GST ADVERTISING, 1998-2000

There were several aspects of the Howard government’s GST advertising that were controversial. One was the amount of money spent. In 1998, Senator Nick Minchin, then Special Minister of State, estimated that the government’s advertising campaign to explain its GST policy ‘may exceed $10 million… I wouldn’t imagine it would go much beyond $10 million’. But the advertising eventually cost taxpayers at least $118.7 million, and there was speculation that it had cost even more, up to $500 million.

The timing of the ‘Unchain My Heart’ advertising campaign was also controversial because the advertising occurred just before the 1998 election. Tony Harris, a former NSW auditor-general, later argued that this ‘was the first [campaign] to use taxpayers’ money to advertise what a government would do if it were re-elected. Voters paid to advertise the government’s election promises’.

The context was also significant because the GST was not a popular policy in the electorate and the advertising seemed persuasive in nature and designed to convince the Australian public about the ‘need’ for the proposed changes. In this respect, the content of the ads was also highly controversial. The ads centred around Joe Cocker’s song ‘Unchain My Heart’ (purchased at a cost of $270,000) and showed people throwing off the chains of the old tax system. It was a particularly emotive image.

While the government and its supporters argued that the ads were necessary to set down an enormous change to the tax system, critics argued that they contained little in the way of information and were more like propaganda. Political journalist Michelle Grattan argued that the GST advertising ‘to promote the tax package before the 1998 election was unabashed politicking with taxpayers’ money’.

When the Canadian government advertised its new GST between 1990 and 1992, critics there also claimed that the advertising was propaganda designed to sell an unpopular policy. In response, however, the Canadian government altered the advertising to make it more ‘informational’, neutral and factual. For example, print advertising was changed from ‘Canadians’ GST makes sense’ to ‘Canada’s GST: Information you should know’.

By contrast, as the script of one GST television ad demonstrates, the Australian advertisements were laden with emotional references and images about removing the shackles of the previous tax system as well. As value statements describing it as ‘pushed up’, ‘complicated’, ‘old fashioned and less fair’. Although the Howard government claimed its advertising was designed to inform people about the new tax system, there was little in the way of explicit information. The ad did not give any details about how the new system would work, merely stating vaguely that it would ‘move our country forward’.

The timing of the GST ads as well as the amount spent on them and their content (including the song, the style of the ads, the lack of information contained in them and the inclusion of fairly strident criticism about the previous system) really ‘pushed the envelope’ in terms of government advertising. Where many government campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s had received bipartisan support, the GST ads opened up serious divisions between the incumbent government and the opposition parties and other critics who complained that government advertising was being abused.

STRENGTHENING MEDICARE, 2004

In 2004, the Howard government’s ‘Strengthening Medicare’ campaign again provoked intense debate because of the high cost of the ads and
Textbox 12.1  Script of Unchain My Heart GST TV advertisement

Broadcast: 14 May 2000, ATV10 Melbourne

Joe Cocker (sung):

Unchain my heart, Baby . . . (music plays in background throughout)

Male voiceover:

Australia is currently being held back.
We are tied to a tax system that has been patched up over and over again since the 1930s.

Over the years, it's just got more complicated, more old fashioned and less fair.
At the same time, income taxes have just kept going up giving workers less and less incentive to earn more.

Average workers now pay a top rate of 43 per cent.
Our current system has heaps of unfair, illogical, hidden sales taxes.
Expensive restaurant meals are tax free.
Cleaning products are taxed at 22 per cent.
Toothpaste is taxed (ironic, chuckle). Toothbrushes aren't.

(Lyrics come in: 'Unchain my heart. Set me free...')
And it lets people use loopholes or deal in cash to avoid paying their share.
Which means you have to pay more.
Meanwhile, heavy taxes on transport hinder our farmers and make our exports less competitive.

(Lyrics come in: Unchain my heart...)

The Commonwealth government's new tax system will tackle these and many other problems. It's a system that will move our country forward not hold it back.

Tax reform. Because we shouldn't hold Australia back.

[speaking hurriedly] Authorised by the Australian Government, Canberra.

their proximity to the election campaign. During the first half of 2004, the government ran ads on a wide range of programs and policies including superannuation, family payments, the environment, telecommunications and domestic violence.

Among these campaigns, the 'Strengthening Medicare' ads were particularly controversial because they were promoting a policy that the government had been criticised for. During 2004, the Labor Party claimed that the government was neglecting the Medicare system and dismantling it by stealth, as evidenced by the difficulty in finding a bulk-billing doctor.53

The ads used what is often described as a common and effective propaganda technique - focusing on the 'person in the street'. Lynette Finch has argued that governments in democratic countries often invoke 'the everyday as the foundation of their propagandist images'.54

The content of the ads again seemed to be more persuasive than informational. For example, in one ad, the female voiceover (representing the government) states: 'We're giving doctors more incentives to bulk bill. Medicare is now paying them more every time they bulk bill children under sixteen and Commonwealth concession card holders.' In response, a woman with a baby on her lap (representing the 'person in the street') smiles and says: 'Well that does sound good'. The voiceover replies: 'Yes. It's just one of the ways we're strengthening Medicare...'.55 Inserting this comment by an 'ordinary Australian' as an opinion and value statement, that the changes 'sound good', clearly went beyond the 'impartial' and neutral presentation of information that ministers had once insisted on (see Chapter 8).

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ADVERTISING, 2005

If the 'Working Nation', 'GST' and 'Strengthening Medicare' campaigns all demonstrated a willingness to alter the boundaries of what had been previously deemed acceptable in government advertising, the Howard government's industrial relations (IR) ads in 2005 moved the boundaries even further.

The timing of these ads was a major break from past practice because the government's advertising campaign was run before legislation to enact its workplace changes had been drafted, let alone introduced into parliament or passed. The context of the campaign was significant. It was designed in response to an $8 million advertising campaign run by the ACTU,
which had been critical of the government's proposed changes. The ACTU television advertisements were considered to be very effective in drawing attention to the issue and were credited with creating a public backlash against the proposed changes.66

Following the union campaign, the government ran full-page newspaper ads and radio advertisements. The scripts of the radio ads suggest that the government's ads were highly defensive and designed to respond to the union's advertisements.

In the first radio ad, a man says: 'You know what scares me? With workplace agreements that we won't be protected any more.' A woman then replies: 'That's not what it says here in the paper [sound of newspaper opening]. Look, protected conditions include four weeks annual leave, personal and carer's leave, parental leave and a maximum number of thirty-eight ordinary working hours per week.'57

In the second ad, a man says: 'Hi Honey. Why are you home early?' and the man responds: 'We're on strike. The government's going to cut my holidays in half.' She replies: 'No, that's not right. I read about it in the paper. Look, it says here they won't ...'58 In these ads, the man who is 'scared' and 'on strike' is implicitly chastised by the woman for his naivety and lack of knowledge about the changes.

At the end of both ads, a male voiceover says: 'The Australian government is committed to a plan to create more jobs, higher wages and a stronger economy ...' Both ads directed listeners to read the full-page newspaper ads.

The ACTU and Labor took the government to the High Court over these IR ads (see Chapter 2). During the case, Justice Michael Kirby described the ads as 'propagandising in advance of [the legislation's] enactment'.59 Even supporters of the government in other instances, such as the Australian newspaper (which had previously editorialised in defence of the government's GST advertisements), said: 'the Government's existing advertising [on industrial relations] is as much propaganda as the ACTU campaign. With one difference: the taxpayer is funding Canberra's campaign.'60

At the time of the High Court challenge, the government had spent $5 million on the IR ads. In October 2003, after the High Court's decision, the government began a heavy bombardment of television advertising extolling the virtues of the changes, including, it was reported, buying 11,000 television spots in October alone for the IR advertisements.61 There were also estimates that the final campaign would end up costing up to $100 million.62 Aside from at least eight different television ads, broadcast thousands of times, there were also quadruple full-page newspaper advertisements, a variety of different radio ads, a 'WorkChoices' website and a 16-page booklet (Figure 12.6).

**CONCLUSION**

The health and social marketing focus of government advertising that was so prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s is still observable in a range of government campaigns that continue to advertise the dangers of smoking, drink-driving and other road safety issues, as well as seeking to prevent drug and alcohol abuse, to encourage immunisation and breast and cervical cancer screening, and promote healthy eating and exercise.

But there have been clear changes in the priorities of government advertising. The more overt social marketing-type advertising campaigns that
government departments and authorities have contributed support to, such as 'Life, Be In It' and 'Clean Up Australia', have decreased in prominence.\textsuperscript{64} Governments are spending less on promoting community programs and 'social marketing' initiatives and more on promoting policies or proposals that are highly controversial.

This is happening at all levels of government and includes both major political parties. Although this chapter has focused on the federal level of government, state Labor governments have also been criticised for their high spending and for the 'partisan' content of their advertisements. For example, in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland there have been complaints about a series of government ads publicising government departments and services and seemingly designed to give the impression that there are no problems with state services such as hospitals, schools, trains or police recruitment. Critics in the states have derided such advertising as 'plainly aimed at making [the] governments look good'.\textsuperscript{65}

In the 20th century, government advertising was shaped by a number of key events such as the two world wars, as well as changing trends in commercial advertising and marketing theory and particularly, in the 1970s, the rise of the 'social marketing' model. Government advertising has also been highly influenced by the changing political context and by trends in political campaigning practice.\textsuperscript{66} A key change has been the move to a more promotional, and then partisan, style of government advertising.

Earlier community service and social marketing government advertising of the 1970s and 1980s shared a number of key features:

- There was an identified social problem such as road safety or health concerns.
- The existence of this social problem was not in dispute but was widely apparent from research and statistical and other information.
- The advertising campaign and its principles was supported by non-profit or other community groups (such as the Anti-Cancer Council).
- There was bipartisan support (as evidenced by a lack of overt criticism from the opponent major party and/or both parties in government approved the theme or aims of the campaign).
- There was also general public acceptance of the need (if not the precise content) of the advertising campaign.
- Because there was general acceptance of their value and need, campaigns were long-term. Even if they were adapted and updated, they tended to run for years. For example, the 'Advance Australia', 'Buy Australian' and 'Australian Made' campaigns ran over eleven years, and road safety and anti-smoking advertising have now been running for over twenty years.

By contrast, many of the key government advertising campaigns which have been broadcast since 1995 have moved sharply away from these principles. The controversial campaigns are short-term and, often, reactive. Their content suggests less emphasis on 'education' and 'information' and a greater emphasis on political persuasion either by promoting the government and its activities in a celebratory, self-congratulatory manner (such as the bicentennial ads) or by being defensive in nature and used to respond to criticisms made by the opposition or other groups (such as unions over the IR changes or the Labor Opposition over claims that Medicare had been run down). Ads are also used to try to convince the public of the value of unpopular policies (such as the GST) or of the merits of a particular political agenda (such as the need for taxation or industrial relations reform).

As a result, we have seen increasing criticism over the past decade that some of the largest government advertising campaigns ever funded are unfair, unnecessary and represent an abuse of taxpayer funds. This has made government advertising one of the most contentious issues in the area of government communication in Australia.
A history of government advertising in Australia

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