# The Limits of Crisis Exploitation:
# The NT Intervention as a Reform Boomerang[1]

*Any government that prides itself on its ability to manage crises is sure to find crises to manage, and crisis management is always available as a way to mobilize public support*,
Murray Edelman.[2]

## The NT Intervention Puzzle

There is no doubt that the Howard government's emergency intervention into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory will go down in history as one of its most remarkable and controversial actions. Whether it will also come to be noted as one of its main achievements is doubtful. With the Howard government bowled out at the recent elections, the future of the intervention itself has become uncertain. It may be paused, shrunk, reformed or terminated altogether, as the Rudd government is finding its feet in the treacherous field of Indigenous affairs. But even if the intervention proves to be short-lived, its very inception remains worthy of serious contemplation.

In this article, I will not join the debate between critics and defenders of the intervention's content and the intentions behind it. Being relatively unfamiliar with Indigenous affairs in Australia, I can be agnostic about these matters. The puzzle that occupies me here is a different and indeed a broader one. Why might a highly experienced government, led by a politically agile prime minister, willingly expose itself to considerable risk of failure — particularly in an area in which it has little political capital and about which the accumulated wisdom of decades of policy experimentation is that quick fixes do not exist, despite the best of intentions?

There are many possible answers to this question. They range from the very benign ('an act of great leadership') to the cynical ('blatant, short-sighted electoral posturing'). The very timing of the initiative — just months before an election — and its follow up just days before the election was called (John Howard's constitutional referendum pledge on reconciliation) do little to undermine the cynics' interpretation. Yet on the other hand, the Howard government did not control the timing of the trigger to this entire intervention, the *Little Children are Sacred* report. Its stark facts, vivid imagery and impassioned plea struck a chord in the press, with the public and, most importantly, among key Indigenous community leaders. Doing nothing in the face of widespread moral outrage was hardly an option.

In my view, a more persuasive answer to the puzzle is that the government both purposefully

used, and at the same time found itself trapped in the rhetoric of emergency, which it had chosen to adopt in framing its interpretation of the report. This is not a unique phenomenon. In what follows, I shall draw on the findings of the interdisciplinary social science field of crisis research to uncover some of the general mechanisms that were most likely at play here, as they have been in many other cases where drastic government initiatives have been taken in response to social or international crises. Firstly, I shall reflect on the notion of emergency, its political ramifications, and the political leadership challenges that arise when a sense of crisis becomes widespread in the community. I will then examine how key players within and outside the Howard government dealt with these challenges. Since the inside story of the policy-making process will most likely remain unwritten for some time, I rely here on media reports and the interpretations of the numerous authors of the quick-response volume of essays about the intervention, *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*.[3]

**From Social Emergency to Political Opportunity**

Emergencies of various kinds — past and future ones, local and far-away ones, natural, technological and antagonistic ones — have risen to unprecedented prominence in recent years. The sense of threat, violation, uncertainty and urgency that terms like emergency and crisis convey shatters people's understanding of the world around them. Emergencies are associated with social trauma, but they are also political theatre. After all, labelling a particular disaster or a certain state of affairs a 'national emergency' has potentially large political consequences. So naming a situation may open the floodgates for resources to flow in, but at the same time it may also herald major contention. To declare something an emergency or a crisis boils down to saying the following: something is seriously wrong; urgent and drastic action needs to be taken to cope with the consequences and prevent further escalation; somebody needs to be blamed for this unacceptable turn of events.

In many cases governments will be on the back foot when a major disaster happens or when advocacy groups succeed in getting public support for designating certain problems emergencies. In such cases governmental crisis management is a form of 'defensive containment' aimed at curbing impact, controlling damage and moving back to 'normal' as soon as possible. Yet it has long been noted by scholars that actors bent on getting things done need to frame 'problems' in order to promote their own pre-existing claims to political authority, so that policy preferences become 'solutions'.[4] Governments can thus be tempted to take the initiative in moving an issue from 'business as usual' to the domain of 'emergency'. Doing so opens up semantic and political space to radically redefine existing problems, propose new policies, foster public reflection, gain popularity and strike at opponents. As Naomi Klein has recently re-iterated and dramatized in her account of 'disaster capitalism' and politico-economic 'shock therapy', political actors both inside and outside government seek to 'exploit' the disruption of 'governance as usual' that emergencies allows.[5] They manufacture upheaval and exploit dramatic labels such as emergency and crisis to defend and strengthen their positions and authority, attract or deflect public attention, get rid of old policies or sow the seeds of new ones.

Disasters and social disruptions do not just 'happen'. They emerge politically from 'contests' between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of the problems at hand, their causes, the responsibility for their occurrence or escalation, and their implications for the future. The challenge is to get one's preferred frame accepted as the dominant

narrative. If public opinion can be persuaded something terrible is occurring that undermines core social values and/or structures and that there is no time to lose to respond to it, avenues for action open up to some actors that would otherwise have remained closed. Invoking a state of emergency may, for example, enable incumbent office-holders to:

- centralize authority in order to pave the way for the decisive, swift, co-ordinated action that is allegedly needed to curb the threat;
- muster people and resources widely within and across levels of government, as well as within the private and community sectors;
- rally popular support for the executive, silence opposition and in some cases formally suspend politics as usual for the duration of the emergency; and
- discredit disliked or oppositional individuals, groups and/or states by asserting they bear responsibility for the occurrence of the emergency.

The perceived need for government to meet the exigencies of a critical situation has prompted the politico-legal doctrine of 'crisis government' (which, among others, was a crucial and controversial linchpin in the Nazi seizure of power in the Weimar republic). This doctrine usually enables a radical centralization of executive power to take effect under conditions of national emergency, such as (threats of) war, civil insurgency or mega-disaster. To judge whether these conditions exist is generally left to the government of the day (although in many jurisdictions this decision can be challenged in fast-track constitutional lawsuits).

The stronger the reliance on executive centralization, the stronger the challenge to democratic authenticity. Parliament can be sidelined; in fact the legislature is expected to rally behind the executive in these hours of need. Lower levels of government can be by-passed (as the Northern Territory government found out). In extreme cases, the freedom of the press can be curtailed and civilian supremacy can give way to military rule. In extremis it boils down to a form of constitutional dictatorship.

Forms of crisis government are invoked regularly (and sometimes for prolonged periods) in politically unstable regimes such as Pakistan, Bolivia and Colombia, but established democracies like Great Britain have also resorted to it, for example during the 1983 Miners' Strike and during the long years of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. At local levels of government, emergency by-laws are in fact quite frequently resorted to in the context of the policing of major demonstrations, major sports events and, as Sydneysiders discovered in the Spring of 2007, political summit meetings. However diverse these various practices may seem, they all amount to a form of the 'securitization' of democratic politics: because there is or might be a severe disruption of the social order as framed by the incumbent government, that government empowers itself to rule with diminished checks and balances.

Klein's study focuses strongly on governments, ruling classes and their neo-liberal policy zealots as the prime exploiters of crisis rhetoric. But in pluralist democracies there are also sets of powerful actors that may perceive 'emergencies' and call for radical measures to combat them. Nor are government ways of framing emergencies always immediately and widely accepted. Oppositional counter-frames may effectively neutralize or trump government emergency rhetoric, making the government look dishonest, disorganized, out of touch or even outright culpable.

Take the example of the so-called Dutroux affair in Belgium.[6] On 13 August 1996 the Belgian police arrested Marc Dutroux, his wife Michèle Martin and their associate Michel Lelièvre. In the following weeks these three individuals led the authorities to two kidnapped girls and the dead bodies of four others. It was a gruesome end to what had been a long search for a series of missing children. The fate of the children shocked the nation, and shock turned to anger when it subsequently transpired that a range of mistakes had been made during the investigation. Communications between police and the judiciary had been poor. Judicial authorities in different parts of the country did not co-operate with one another. Families of the victims had been treated disrespectfully, and previous clues leading to Dutroux and his associates had not been checked thoroughly.

The revelations unleashed a storm of public indignation. Suspicions were aired that political and judicial authorities were aiding and abetting paedophile and other criminal networks. In the end no political casualties ensued from the inquiry undertaken, nor could the parties agree on the wide-ranging reform package proposed by the inquiry. With no catharsis resulting from the initial inquiry, the sense of crisis unleashed by the Dutroux affair deepened into an institutional crisis. Massive and continuous grassroots public protests (the so-called White Marches) involving hundreds of thousands of citizens temporarily bridging the political divide between the Dutch-speaking Flemish and the French-speaking Walloon parts of the population. They sent a powerful message to the incumbent elites, challenging the foundations of not only the justice system but the entire Belgian political order.

The dynamics and outcomes of these crisis exploitation efforts are unpredictable. The public passions that physical and/or socially constructed disruptions arouse can be volatile, and the persuasiveness of particular ways of framing emergencies can change abruptly, triggering political reversals of fortunes for key players, policies and institutions.

When the Madrid bombings occurred just days before the 2004 national elections in Spain, the incumbent government of Prime Minister Aznar and the opposition, led by social-democrat Zapatero, sponsored radically different interpretations of the disaster. Aznar maintained it was an attack by his old nemesis, Basque separatist group ETA[7]; the opposition accused him of a cover up, claiming the real culprit must have been al-Qaeda delivering its bloody form of 'payback' for the government's participation in the war in Iraq. Within the space of forty-eight hours, a frenetic framing contest ensued. The government's position gradually lost credibility as more details of the police investigation became public. The opposition deftly used the Internet and SMS to stage 'flash mob' rallies at the governing party's offices around the country, giving the impression that the population at large was up in arms against the alleged cover up. Zapatero won the election on a last minute swing against the government.[8]

The Madrid example is unusually clear-cut. Many other instances are not, and we do not as yet possess systematic knowledge of how and why some crises claim political scalps, create political heroes and generate winning coalitions in favour of certain 'lessons' and 'reforms' while others do not. What we do know is that behind all the rhetoric of crisis, the calls for investigation, the mobilization of emergency funds, the rushing through of emergency legislation, and the efforts to assign and deflect blame lies an impetus that few political actors can afford to ignore. This is the temptation to treat signs of major physical or social disruption as not just operational but as political challenges. Both governments and their critics will to some extent engage in *crisis exploitation*, which I define as *the purposeful utilization of*

*crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter public perceptions, public policies and public careers*.

Crisis exploitation involves four closely interrelated strategies:

- *Perceptual control*: the 'management' of cognitive images about events and their causes. Some actors may seek to manage perceptions by playing down the seriousness of particular events or information contents, whilst others seek to play them up (to denote successful efforts to accomplish the latter, Edelman talks of 'semantically created crises').
- *Conflict reduction*: through rhetoric crisis actors seek to align ambiguous, different and potentially competing definitions of the situation into a coherent and widely accepted 'master frame'.
- *Affective control*: the 'management' of individual and collective emotions generated by the breakdown of routine symbolic orders that crises entail.
- *De- and re-legitimation*: the very naming of a situation as a crisis implies that some people, organisations or structures must have failed and therefore need to be removed, punished, adjusted or re-invented; and that public trust must be created in whatever is being suggested as the 'lessons' of the crisis.

Crisis exploitation is problematic on various fronts. Firstly, when are things 'bad enough' to be rhetorically constructed in evocative, emotive terms such as emergency, disaster or crisis (or, alternatively, fiasco, scandal, deception)? Physical indicators of misery are hardly a reliable guide. A few dozen people killed in a flood in Bangladesh are considered a routine disturbance there, whereas in Australia this would be a national tragedy which would cast a very long political shadow indeed. Emergency is a label, not a fact. The political applicability of the label is contingent upon indeterminate combinations of a whole range of factors, such as types of triggers; nature, scope and extent of physical disturbance; relative (in)visibility of human consequences; public credibility of the source(s) of the emergency claim; timing of the labelling exercise relative to other significant issues in the public domain; and so on.

Secondly, it is one thing to evoke a public sense of emergency. It is quite another to control its abatement. When does a particular problem cease to be an emergency? Who, if anyone, gets to make that call, other than in the formal-legal sense of rescinding disaster declarations and the like? How big are the changes to normal patterns of public power and accountability that are being put forward? In other words: how much suspension of politics as usual can and should a democracy be prepared to bear, and for how long? How 'temporary' are forms of crisis government once they are instigated? Or, in contemporary jargon, what 'exit strategy' is available, and who is accountable for it?

Leaders can get addicted to crisis government. Ruling by decree is so much more straightforward than having to negotiate with legislatures, stakeholders and other tiers of government every step of the way. In a small but telling illustration of this phenomenon, it took some rather blunt and persistent acts of persuasion by local aldermen, councillors and public servants to get the Amsterdam mayor Ed van Thijn to accept that, more than two weeks into the disaster, he had to terminate the state of emergency he had declared in response to a major air crash that demolished two apartment buildings. Yes, the accident was terrible for the hundreds of people directly involved, but the normal business of the other million or so needed to be taken care of as well. Having the key players bogged down in a bunker micro-

managing what was now well into the aftermath of the emergency response by exercising command and control powers (instead of the normal Dutch mode of painstakingly negotiated multi-party compromises) had brought government of areas and issues other than the disaster to a complete standstill.

Finally, the long-term implications of 'emergencies' are not only significant but quite often widely perceived as undesirable. Because they serve to release the constraining impact of procedural niceties, checks and balances, and existing path dependencies, episodes of emergency government often entail sweeping initiatives and big reforms — but also big mistakes. These typically prove exceedingly hard to undo, if only because policy makers have made a highly public commitment to their crisis response policies. They have 'too much invested to quit' as, for example, in Bush's road from September 11 to the Iraq fiasco.[9]

## From Inquiry to Intervention: A Contested Emergency

As an act of crisis exploitation, the NT intervention was only partially successful for the Howard government. From its perspective, not knowing the eventual outcome of the 2007 elections, there were some clear immediate positives. It engaged in an intensive 'meaning-making' exercise, drawing on powerful (if sometimes inappropriate) historical analogies, such as Hurricane Katrina, to drive home the seriousness of the situation.[10] And it did manage to capitalise on the *Little Children are Sacred* report to instil a sense of urgency around the issue. It also managed to suspend politics as usual, for instance by pushing an unprecedented package of legislation and measures through Parliament in record time. Finally it did get at least the beginnings of a federal operation on the ground in a matter of weeks, sidestepping the usual delays and dilutions of policy implementation in normal times.

But it had many hallmarks of a pyrrhic victory. In shorthand: the government's framing effort may have managed to control public cognitions and affect surrounding the plight of Aboriginal children in remote NT communities, but it never managed to reduce conflict concerning the top-down and expansive nature of its response, nor to legitimise the master frame it constructed as the ultimate end of the intervention: the 'normalisation' of Indigenous Australia.

In fact, the government's framing effort was contested almost every step of the way. This began with its insistence, backed by the *Little Children are Sacred* report, that child sexual abuse in certain Indigenous communities was rampant and constituted a real, present, urgent and above all utterly unacceptable violation of key social values. Although this way of framing the various problems was widely accepted, various critics argued that this problem had been named in various investigations long preceding the *Little Children are Sacred* report. They sought to reframe the crisis as a product of prior government negligence, questioning the government's timing and, therefore, its motives. Why declare this an emergency now, that is, just months before an election? Was the government trying to create a 'wedge issue' for federal Labor? Was it part of its ongoing pre-election campaign to blame the Labor-led states and territories for some of the country's most troubling public policy conundrums (water management, hospital care)? As a result the 'rally around the flag' effect aimed for by the government did not last.

There was also intense criticism of the discrepancy between the scope of the original *Little*

*Children are Sacred* diagnosis, which provided the key rationale for the intervention, and the sweeping breadth and depth of the government's response. The government claimed its approach was designed to address not just the symptoms (child abuse) but to eradicate the root causes of the problem (the vicious cycle of low incentives to study and work, joblessness, poverty, despair, alcohol and substance abuse, and dysfunctional behaviour). This could only be accomplished by a broad-based campaign effectively entailing a federal takeover of local communities. Its critics argued that the government was abusing the *Little Children are Sacred* report to create momentum for what it sold as a straightforward 'rescue operation' but what in fact amounted to an all-out assault on the prevailing policy paradigm in Indigenous affairs. They pointed out that along with the nurses, doctors, policemen, inspectors and, above all, truckloads of money would come renewed dispossession of land, the end of self-government, and relentless pressure to abandon identity-based Indigenous ways of life. In their hands, the government's stated aim to 'normalize' the situation became a much bigger threat to Indigenous communities than the original child abuse crisis ever was.

Thirdly, there was a strand of essentially pragmatic criticism saying the government's plans simply would not work. Critics in this vein hit a familiar, but evidence-based note: Canberra's great hopes and best laid plans will be dashed when implemented in Milingimbi, Milikapati, Mutitjulu and all those other complex, remote communities. That's how it has been in the past in Indigenous affairs. It is also what more than three decades of worldwide implementation research suggests.[11] Policies devised and decided on the run tend throw up a host of debilitating execution problems: disagreement, delays, ducking, disorganization and distortion. The result: cost explosions, loss of bureaucratic momentum and political support, and a host of unintentional negative effects on target populations that come to rival, if not overshadow, those identified in the first place. Finally, there was concern about the open-ended nature of the federal intervention. Although there was talk of 'normalization and exit', it remained unclear when exactly the situation would be seen to be sufficiently stabilized to warrant a federal retreat and, presumably, a return to more decentralized forms of governance.

Whereas one might argue that the first two strands of criticism are rooted in ideological differences, the latter two are not. Although the supporters of the intervention are likely to dismiss the prediction of implementation failure as the 'rhetoric of reaction', it has a lot of social science research and practitioner wisdom on its side. Certainly the findings of comparative crisis research echo those of the general implementation literature: the bigger a crisis-induced policy reform and the more it is imposed from the top, the more problem-ridden its implementation and the more likely its eventual futility.[12] Many of the officials and agencies engaged in this intervention were well aware of the enormous risks the then government is running. One might have expected that for that very reason some would have urged more caution and consultation in the process. Clearly, those voices did not carry the day. In the months and years to come we will find out if the NT intervention fits the pattern of emergency-induced reforms turning into reform-induced fiascos, or whether it has proven to be one of the rare exceptions to that rule. The same goes for the lack of a clearly circumscribed exit scenario: like the 'War on Terror', the 'NT emergency' is open-ended, metaphorical, and therefore potentially endemic and enduring.

## How Did the Intervention Happen?

Political leaders sometimes have to 'gamble with history', as one observer of the early, radical years of Ronald Reagan's presidency characterised that leader's political style.[13] But boldness

alone does not make for great leadership: most successful reformers make sure they have buy-in support from the key actors inside and outside government whose co-operation is essential for making things work on the ground.[14] This was clearly not the case here. This takes us back to the central puzzle of this discussion: why do governments willingly expose themselves to considerable risk of failure?

Was the intervention nothing more than a classic 'knee-jerk' reform of a government swept along by the 'swirling cyclone of emotion' generated by the *Little Children are Sacred* report?[15] John Howard's own account gives some room for this interpretation. He commented that it was Noel Pearson's trembling voice when he conjured up the image of the tiny child cowering in the corner that had prompted him to action. Jon Altman may have found this surprising for a government normally wedded to 'economic rationalist approaches', but he should not have been.[16] Research suggests that the power of emotion in these cases cannot easily be understated: when children get hurt, emotions run high, and even experienced politicians can get caught up in the maelstrom of calls for action fuelled by moral indignation that sometimes far exceeds the real proportions of the problem or ignores pervasive uncertainties about its causes.[17]

The Howard haters probably prefer the 'ideological zeal' explanation, pointing to what they perceive to be his and his government's long-standing opposition to Indigenous land rights, autonomy and identity politics. This explanation may perhaps explain the substantive thrust of the intervention. It cannot, however, plausibly account for its timing. In the past eleven years there have been many reports and other indicators the government could have chosen to interpret as the 'smoking gun' for the alleged failure of policies that produced what Tim Rowse has called 'Aboriginal jurisdictions'. It could have used any one to legitimise a drastic federal intervention — but it never did bite that bullet. Others would say it did in fact try, but failed.[18] Some would argue that the *Little Children are Sacred* report was simply the straw that broke the camel's back, depicting the intervention as 'the culmination of eleven years of chipping away at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative institutions'.[19] I am not convinced. In my view, it was quite unlike John Howard to leave such an apparently long-harboured ambition simmering until so late into his long reign.

A combination of situational and ideational factors bring us somewhat closer to a plausible explanation. The focal point then becomes the, perhaps, tacit but unmistakeable nexus between Howard, his latest activist Indigenous Affairs minister and former soldier Mal Brough, and Noel Pearson, in the latter's role as a 'moral entrepreneur' in this crisis. In effect, the Howard government had an ideological disposition but lacked the moral capital in the Indigenous policy arena to act on it; Pearson possessed precisely such capital, and over the years had begun to advocate policy change that shared at least some of Howard's desire for a new, individualistic, mainstreaming-oriented departure in Indigenous economic and social governance. When Pearson then played up the *Little Children are Sacred* report's findings, Howard seized the momentum, borrowing from Pearson's work yet improvising a package that went well beyond Pearson's own comfort zone.[20]

In my view, this situational-ideological account needs to be complemented by an institutional one. In essence, such an explanation says the government acted because it could, and because it had used the same strategy with political success in the past. As Walter and Strangio point out in an intriguing new book, Howard's frequent invocation of alleged 'threats' and 'crises' to unilaterally impose policies may be partly the product of his psychological fit with the

‘strong leader’ profile. This profile (as outlined by the Melbourne political psychologist Graham Little[21]), projects leadership as combating perceived adversities and opponents by a ‘no-nonsense’, hard-working, centrally orchestrated approach to governing.[22] But the very viability of this style has been greatly facilitated by the gradual accrual of institutional possibilities to rule from the top.

Walter and Strangio argue that Australian politics since Whitlam has seen a steady accumulation of power resources in the office and person of the prime minister, made possible by an erosion of potential sources of countervailing power (the party, the bureaucracy, parliament). Howard’s particular leadership style was greatly facilitated by this potential for centralization after 2004, benefiting from the relatively rare opportunity of Senate control to push through otherwise politically unfeasible initiatives such as WorkChoices. In case of the intervention, the federal government knew it had the institutional ability to directly intervene in a Territory’s affairs, something it cannot do to the same extent in the case of the States. Moreover, within the Indigenous affairs policy subsystem, an institutional ‘hollowing out’ (including the outright abolition of some institutions like ATSIC) of potential countervailing forces has occurred in the last decade. Hence it should come as no surprise that the federal government could intervene bluntly in what many thought was destined to become an ever more self-governing, and partly state-run policy arena.

## Beyond Crisis Exploitation: The Reform Boomerang

While it may be true that the great leaders in history are those who turned crisis into opportunity, it should be remembered that many failed in such attempts: their reforms either never got off the ground or in implementation turned into painful fiascos that came to haunt them. Crises, in other words, tend to generate reform boomerangs: big words that lead to big decisions that lead to big mistakes. In fact, empirically grounded principles of prudent and enduring policy reform largely conflict with the rather Machiavellian imperatives of crisis exploitation. What are these principles and how do they serve as a corrective to the temptations of crisis exploitation?[23]

Firstly, leaders need some kind of policy compass or road map to help them negotiate the inherent tension between conserving and reforming before they seek to create a sense of urgency. Parallel with their reform ambitions, they must have a clear idea of what is worth preserving in the community or policy domain in question. This can guide them once they move into the unfamiliar, chaotic terrain of crisis exploitation. It should prevent them from falling prey to common crisis management syndromes such as ‘ad hocery’, narrowing the circle of players, and self-entrapment in rigid policy formulae — precisely the groupthink-like behaviour that characterised the Howard inner circle in the making of the intervention.[24] Having a policy compass that allows for nuance even in the face of seemingly wide open reform windows should also prevent leaders from ‘shooting from the hip’: making fast, sweeping, ill-considered decisions with irreversible consequences.[25]

An obvious case in point is the ‘War on Terror’: going into Afghanistan, however understandable the impulse was in emotional and political terms, locked the Bush administration and its allies into occupying a country that no foreign power has ever managed to tame before. And moreover it set the Americans on the road to Iraq, a product of the most blatant form of crisis exploitation that will go down in history as one of the biggest and most fateful foreign policy blunders in the history of the United States. On the domestic ‘front’ the

September 11 crisis led not only to a flood of security legislation that gave government agencies huge powers at the expense of civil liberties, it also provided the stepping stone for one of the largest administrative reorganisations in US history: the establishment of a mega Department for Homeland Security. It confirmed a maxim of the 'good politics, bad policy' equation: any short-term reassurance effect it may have had on the population was subsequently nullified by the relentless infighting and persistent co-ordination burdens it gave rise to, which proved painfully instrumental in aggravating the mismanagement of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Secondly, if in their reformist zeal leaders play the emergency card as a way of short-circuiting crucial stakeholders and critics, they will mobilize their own opposition at a time when their performance is already under scrutiny. Leaders should not overestimate the 'emergency dividend'. Even if they initially manage to capture the public mood with their crisis rhetoric; even if they manage to secure emergency powers; even if initial press coverage is supportive or muted; and even if legislatures feel forced to take a backseat temporarily; the consistent lesson of studies on institutional reform is that leaders in contemporary complex democratic governance systems simply cannot get away with unilaterally devising radical reforms and expect them to work or to last. Instead of assuming that most crises still generate the rally around the flag effect, as seen in the United States following September11, leaders must entertain the alternative scenario: when crisis generates a search for political culprits, advocating reform is easily construed by critics as a cheap strategy for avoiding blame.

Thirdly, crisis-induced reforms create exceptional challenges for the long term. It is much easier to get an emergency reform package accepted than to get it successfully implemented. The administration of reform programs is a long-term process that generates complex problems for administrative leaders. Crises do not make these problems disappear. Crisis-induced reforms are often a product of centralized and rapid decision making. Due process makes way for procedural shortcuts; firm action rhetoric masks implementation dilemmas. Whereas successful reform leaders take the time to listen to and incorporate anyone who may become involved during the implementation stages, reform processes that rest on crisis exploitation often exclude precisely those actors. In this way the classic 'appreciative gap' that separates policy makers in capital cities from implementers 'on the ground' is not bridged but rather widened, with predictable consequences.

In sum, the comparative study of reforms demonstrates quite emphatically that crash-through approaches seldom succeed. What is needed instead is proactive consultation, support-building and co-optation of relevant interests, in particular potential 'veto-players' that can make or break the implementation of reforms. The NT intervention process so far has been clearly at odds with these maxims. If the Rudd government chooses to pursue the radical reform path in Indigenous policy taken by its predecessor, it should at the very least take one step back and start consulting and persuading where Howard et al chose to conspire and dictate.

Writing this article just after the election, it is difficult to tell if this is going to be the case. My first hunch is that, despite election rhetoric to the contrary, Kevin Rudd's political style fits the Walter and Strangio diagnosis of the trend towards centralised, top-down forms of prime ministerial leadership. Hard-working, controlling, demanding, relying on a small inner circle rather than on wide-ranging debate, promising to 'fix' federalism, and threatening to centralize the running of all of Australia's hospitals, he resembles the 'strong leader' type outlined by Little.[26] So did Malcolm Fraser and to some extent Paul Keating (Keating's

reputation as a successful reformer stems from his time as Treasurer in which he acted in tandem with the much more inclusive Bob Hawke and key sections of the bureaucracy). And each of their prime ministerships was characterised by largely failed attempts to forge and consolidate major reforms. Fraser got bogged down in battles between wets and dries; Keating's post-economic 'big picture' was voted out decisively in 1996. Howard's imposition of WorkChoices was one of the cornerstones of his unravelling in 2007.

It is to be hoped that Kevin Rudd will learn from these experiences. Crisis exploitation is a myopic strategy: potentially effective in the short run, but potentially self-defeating after the sense of urgency has subsided and the crisis game gives way to the implementation game. Perhaps the most disturbing lesson of such episodes is that they can easily happen again. From time to time, all prime ministers since Whitlam have fallen for the temptation of turning emergency into a political style. That may have made for 'good politics' from their point of view, but more often than not it makes for 'bad policy' from the point of view of balanced and democratic public policymaking.

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1. This article is an extended and revised version of my 'Crisis Exploitation: Reflections on the "National Emergency" in the Northern Territory', *Dialogue*, December 2007. I thank Jon Altman, Allan McConnell and Jim Walter for their useful feedback.
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3. J. Altman and M. Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, North Carlton, Arena Publications, 2007.
4. U. Beck, *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity*, London, Sage, 1995; J. W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, New York, Harper Collins, 2000; M. Hardt, T. Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1992.
5. N. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, London, Allen Lane, 2007.
6. Based on S. Staelraeve and P. 't Hart, 'Dutroux and Dioxin: Crisis Investigations, Elite Accountability and Institutional Reform in Belgium', in A. Boin, A. McConnell and P. 't Hart (eds), *Governing After Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, in press.
7. That is, Euskadi ta Askatasuna: Basque Nation and Liberty.
8. Based on J. Olmeda, 'A Reversal of Fortune: Blame Games and Framing Contests after the 3/11 Terrorist Attacks in Madrid', in Boin et al, *Governing After Crisis*.
9. A. Teger, *Too Much Invested to Quit*, New York, Pergamon, 1980.
10. True to the spirit of emergencies as 'framing contests', the government's critics used equally strong counter-analogies (the Nazis, the *Bringing Them Home* report, the Trojan Horse and, but in a different sense again, Katrina) in their efforts to discredit the government's position. See, for example, P. Dodson, 'Whatever Happened to Reconciliation?' in Altman and Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation*, p. 25. On the use of historical analogies in crisis management, see A. Brändström, F. Bynander and P. 't Hart, 'Governing by Looking Back: Historical Analogies and Crisis Management', *Public Administration*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2004, pp. 191–210.
11. An allusion to the classic implementation study: J. Pressman and A. Wildavsky, *Implementation: How Great Hopes in Washington are Dashed in Oakland* (etc), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984. For an example of this type of critique of the NT intervention, see I. Anderson, 'Health Policy for a Crisis or a Crisis in Policy?' in Altman and Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation*, pp. 133–40.
12. See A. Boin and P. 't Hart, 'Public Leadership in Times of Crisis', *Public Administration Review*, vol. 63, no. 5, 2003, pp. 544–53; S. Dekker and D. Hansén, 'Learning under Pressure: The Effects of Politicisation on Organisational Learning', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, vol. 14, no. 2: 2004, pp. 211–30; Boin et al, *Governing After Crisis*. The terminology adopted here comes from A. Hirschman, *The*

*Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge Mass., Belknap Press, 1991.

13. L. Barrett, *Gambling With History*, New York, Doubleday, 1983.

14. Boin and 't Hart, 'Public Leadership in Times of Crisis'; P. 't Hart and J. Gustavsson, 'Foreign Economic Crisis, Reformist Leadership and Policy Change: Lessons from Australia and Sweden', *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, vol. 24, no, 1, 2002, pp. 145–74; S. Goldfinch and P. 't Hart, 'Leadership and Institutional Reform: Engineering Macroeconomic Policy Change in Australia', *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2003, pp. 235–70.

15. On 'knee-jerk' responses to emergency, see C. Hood and M. Lodge, 'Pavlovian Responses to Media Feeding frenzies', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2002 [PAGE NUMBERS?]. The second quote is from G. Rundle, 'Military Humanitarianism in Australia's North', in Altman and Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation*, p. 37.

16. J. Altman, 'In the Name of the Market?', in Altman and Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation*, p. 318.

17. Hood and Lodge, 'Pavlovian Responses to Media Feeding Frenzies'. See also E. Goode and N. Ben Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, New York, Wiley, 1994.

18. See, for example, W. Tilmouth, 'Saying No to $60 Million', in Altman and Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation*, p. 232.

19. M. Hinkson, 'In the Name of the Child', in Altman and Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation*, p. 7.

20 See Altman, *Coercive Reconciliation*, pp. 309–10.

21. G. Little, *Strong Leadership*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1988.

22. J. Walter and P. Strangio, *No, Prime Minister: Reclaiming Politics From Leaders*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2007. For an elaboration of the argument in view of the NT intervention, see also J. Walter, 'Post-Democracy? The Command Culture and Policy Fiasco', presented at the Public Leadership in Australia and Beyond Workshop, ANU, 29–30 November 2007.

23. The following section builds upon A. Boin and P. 't Hart, 'Leadership in Times of Crisis: Mission Impossible?', *Public Administration Review*, vol. 63, no. 5, 2003, pp. 544–53.

24. Walter, 'Post-Democracy?'

25 . The term comes from I. L. Janis, *Crucial Decisions: Leadership in Policymaking and Crisis Management*, New York, Free Press, 1989.

26. Little, *Strong Leadership*.