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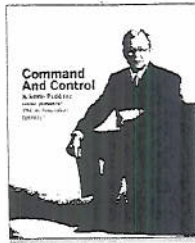
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The Weekend Australian Magazine

Command And Control

Is Kevin Rudd the most powerful PM in Australian history?





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Those involved in the PM's press office refuse to speak on the record, but they maintain they are driven more by the changing demands of the media than by a desire for Orwellian power.

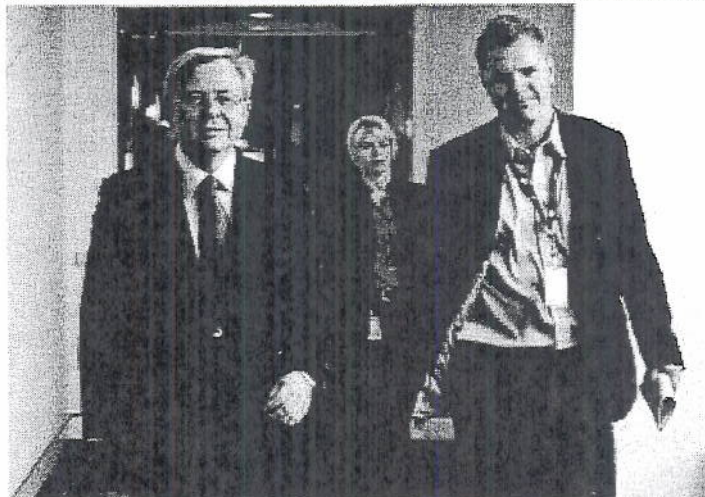
"The game has changed," says one. "There is not a media cycle anymore, there is a media cyclone. There is so much news out there that if you don't maintain discipline, whatever you are trying to say gets scattered and atomised." Hence the need to stay on-message. "The modern news cycle feeds on disputes and inconsistencies, so you either feed the beast with the opposition or the beast feeds on you," he says. "So we are very focused on maintaining discipline and consistency, but that's not a reflection on our governing style, it's a reflection of the modern media cycle. Ignore that at your peril."

The Government has become a media outlet in its own right now, tweeting, blogging and releasing photos, text and policies on its website. Unlike Howard, Rudd has embraced multimedia outlets such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, as well as FM radio and TV shows such as *Rove*, to sell his message to a youth audience. "We have looked for the low-hanging fruit which the Howard government did not use, so we started with FM radio," says a Labor staffer. "The reality is that people communicate using these tools and don't necessarily use traditional media outlets, so you have to fill this space."

Rudd's desire to control the agenda has led to new rules behind the scenes. The heads of each government agency in Canberra are now required to produce a weekly report on issues they have coming up that are likely to attract media attention. "The generous view is that it keeps the government informed of what is happening, but the cynical view is that it feeds into their media control strategy," says a senior public servant. Other sources add that even the watchdog agencies are required to lodge reports about issues of media interest, despite the fact that they are independent statutory bodies that

are supposed to monitor government, not pander to its media strategy. "When it comes to media control they are blind to our independence," says one senior watchdog staffer.

Similarly, since Rudd's election all independent statutory authorities in Canberra have been required to provide briefs to their minister's office on issues likely to be raised in Senate Estimates hearings, to ensure that there are no ugly surprises on the day. Even the Labor Party itself has been ordered to sing from Rudd's song-sheet. In July, the Government appointed a four-man troubleshooting team to the ALP national conference to intervene when any of the 400 delegates strayed from the script. These



Young guns: Rudd with Alister Jordan, top, his 30-year-old chief of staff; and with his media chief Lachlan Harris, also 30