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PROFESSIONALISATION: OF WHAT, SINCE WHEN, AND BY WHOM¹

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Abstract

This paper presents evidence from research interviews with national campaign directors from Australia's two major political parties to suggest the continued relevance and utility of the terms *professionalisation* and its cognates, *professional* and *professionalism*, in describing and explaining the transformation of election campaigns and party organisation in Australia in recent decades.

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If there were prizes for provocative titles of journal articles, then surely British scholars Darren Lilleker and Ralph Negrine would be contenders for the blunt challenge they issued with: "Professionalisation: Of What? Since When? By Whom?" (Lilleker & Negrine 2002). For anyone embarking on the professionalisation debate, those three questions encapsulate the complex, contested nature of the term. Indeed, Lilleker and Negrine argue that the word should be abandoned, at least in discussions of campaign communications, in favour of more specific terms. Yet contested terminology is no stranger to political science, and this paper presents evidence from Australia's two major political parties to suggest the continued relevance and utility of the terms *professionalisation* and its cognates, *professional* and *professionalism*, in describing and explaining the transformation of election campaigns and party organisation in Australia in recent decades. The paper sets out a working definition of professionalism as it relates to the national parties' election campaign managers, derived from the literature and from research interviews. It further sets out the role of these individuals in the professionalisation of Australian election campaigns and political parties. It thus seeks to provide answers to Lilleker and Negrine's three questions, identifying professionalisation's characteristics (of what) and timing (since when), and explaining its causation (by whom).

At the outset however it is right to acknowledge the acuity of Lilleker and Negrine's questions. Their first question prompts us to select the appropriate *unit of analysis*: are we interested in the professionalisation of individuals, institutions or systems? Does professionalisation require merely a change of personnel - for example as television-capable MPs supplant those without media skills, or as cohorts of university educated marketing specialists replace amateurs and bureaucrats in party Head Offices? Or does professionalisation operate at the institutional level, as parliaments, political parties and party head offices adopt new structures, processes and cultural norms? And is the phenomenon observed equally in parliamentary and presidential systems, in newer democracies as well as old, in authoritarian as well as representative systems? Their second question poses a different challenge, to conceptualise professionalisation as a *dynamic process of change*. Has professionalism happened, or is it still underway? Does it, or did it, happen quickly or slowly - disruptively or through path dependency? Does it, or did it, occur at the same pace and in the same sequence in different countries, or in different institutions within the same country? Is it fixed and stable, or can it be subverted, delayed, even reversed? Indeed, if professionalisation has taken place, how are we to describe and measure it, and compare it with whatever came before? Their third question deals with the no less daunting process of *causation*. What caused professionalisation? Did it come about as the result of exogenous factors - for example, the changing technologies of communications, as suggested by Norris and others (Norris 2000)? Or did it occur within political institutions, through endogenous

processes of learning, adaptation and experimentation? Was professionalisation something that ‘happened to’ political institutions or was it induced by human agency?

Sitting beneath all these considerations is the implicit normative issue. Is professionalisation a positive development in democratic terms, representing a valuable accretion of skills and experience-based knowledge, an adaptive response to unpredictably changing external circumstances? Or are there other connotations - darker trends toward spin and manipulation in place of voter deliberation and engagement? Are professionals unwelcome intruders into the deliberative space rightly occupied by amateur citizens? Does professionalism debase political discourse, reduce policy choice and contribute to a democratic deficit?

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To unravel these problems and to develop a meaningful definition, we can discern in the literature three critical elements or tests of professional in the political context. The first test relates to the *economic returns* derived from political activity. In his classic formulation, Max Weber distinguished between one who lives “for” politics, for whom politics is a vocation and a source of inner meaning, and one who lives “from” politics, who “strives to make it into an enduring source of income” (Weber 1919). The second test relates to the *technical competence* of the professional, on the basis of which those economic returns are earned. Thus in the 1980s Angelo Panebianco identified the “electoral professional”, a type of party official who was introducing the skills of polling, media management and policy analysis which the “catch-all” parties needed to engage with the electorate – in the process supplanting the bureaucratic type that had characterised the former “mass” parties (Panebianco 1988, and see Kirchheimer 1966). Paolo Mancini was likewise in no doubt that “professionalism in campaigning” is constituted by the intervention of “professionals,” who are skilled in political consulting, polling and media production (Mancini 1999). Rachel Gibson and Andrea Römmele developed the CAMPROF index to quantify party professionalisation by measuring specific campaign activities of a technical or organisational character, such as telemarketing, opinion polling, and use of PR and media consultants (Gibson and Römmele 2001).

On the basis of these two tests, then, professionalism requires paid full-time work and specialised expertise. Yet to base a claim for professional status solely on these two tests would be to miss a crucial third test of professionalism: its ideology of client service. Weber made clear that living from politics is not incompatible with living for politics; indeed, “generally one does both.” Professional behaviour has a vocational, ethical or altruistic character, whereby the professional is motivated to look beyond his or her own interests and to focus on achieving the best interests of the client. Thus medical professionals devote their technical skills to curing patients, while legal professionals defend their clients’ innocence; to do otherwise – for example, by putting personal interests ahead of the client’s interests – would be to act in an unprofessional way. In the political context, the professional is focussed on promoting the interests of a leader, movement or political party. When Margaret Scammell searched a campaign ‘war room’ in the United States for professional hallmarks, including an ethical code, she found critical shortcomings. Her conclusion was that US political consultants and campaign managers are not professionals but mere craft practitioners, informed by “political folk wisdom” and ethically constrained only by a pragmatic search for “what we can get away with” (Scammell 1997: 5-6). More recently however, Grossman’s survey of political consultants in the United States detects a developing “professional ideology” based on clear principles, including a commitment to the interests of the client. “Their purpose is to help candidates win” elections; they will not for example

recommend a campaign activity that would not help the client win even where doing so would advance the financial interests of the consultant (Grossman 2009).

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To explore and test these three criteria in the Australian context, interviews were conducted with every surviving national campaign director of the two major political parties, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Liberal Party of Australia.² Fourteen interviews were conducted, with five Liberals who held office in sequence dating back to the 1970s, and nine ALP officials dating back to the 1960s.³ Each of the officials had held their party's most senior organisational position (Federal Director of the Liberal Party and National Secretary of the ALP)⁴, and in that capacity had served as the national campaign director of their party's federal election campaigns.⁵ Supplemented with documentary and archival records, this approach allowed comparisons of campaign management practices through time and across both parties. National campaign directors were chosen because of their unique responsibility for and insight into campaign management and its changing practices. Of particular relevance in a study of professionalisation, national campaign directors offer the perspectives of those actually driving the introduction of new campaign practices and norms. This "insider" perspective is largely absent from studies that seek to identify professionalism by reference to external benchmarks.

In the interviews, each official was asked if he regarded himself as a professional and to explain what he meant by the term. Their responses suggest that, while professionalism may be a contested term among scholars, it is widely used by party officials, is readily embraced by them as an appropriate way of describing their work, and carries a rich and coherent set of meanings which broadly confirmed the three tests suggested by the literature.

Professionals are paid for their work. The economic aspect of the party officials' work emerged as perhaps the most obvious element of professionalism. They are paid, full time and often long-term employees of the party. This differentiates them from unpaid volunteers at the branch level, as Cyril Wyndham acknowledged:

Most of the people in branches are amateurs. That's alright. No disparagement to them. But you can't be in a job like I had and be an amateur. It's like running a business - running a business with a cause.

Lynton Crosby similarly differentiated those who "as a career choice" chose employment in the "professional wing" of the party from the "well-meaning amateurs" and weekend activists who indulge in politics as a "pastime":

² The research was initially published in Mills (2013), *Campaign Professionals: party officials and the professionalisation of Australian political parties* (PhD Thesis), accessible at http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/11490/1/StephenMills_thesis_2013.pdf, and subsequently as Mills (2014), *The Professionals: Money, Strategy and the Rise of the Political Campaigner in Australia*, Melbourne: Black Inc.

³ Interviews were conducted with Cyril Wyndham (in office 1963-69), David Combe (1973-81), Bob McMullan (1981-88), Bob Hogg (1988-93), Gary Gray (1993-2000), Geoff Walsh (2000-03), Tim Gartrell (2003-08), Karl Bitar (2008-11) and George Wright (from 2011), from the ALP. Interviews were also conducted with Liberal federal directors Tim Pascoe (1974), Tony Eggleton (1977-91), Andrew Robb (1991-97), Lynton Crosby (1997-2003) and Brian Loughnane (from 2003).

⁴ Wyndham, Mick Young and Combe (till 1974) were titled ALP federal secretary.

⁵ The title 'national campaign director' was first used by Labor's federal secretary Mick Young before the 1972 election and adopted by the Liberals before the 1975 election. Wyndham and Pascoe were not national campaign directors.

What I mean by a political professional is someone who as a career course effectively chose politics, and it wasn't a thing that you did on weekends and got excited by.

The distinctive economic status of the party official fully meets Weber's definition of the person who lives *'from'* politics. Yet the actual salaries paid to the officials do not themselves seem to be at issue. Officials are not apparently motivated by remuneration; indeed as Loughnane claimed, "just about everyone" among them "could be earning more money doing something else."

Professionals possess high levels of occupational skill and experience. Campaign professionals are paid for their work because, they recognise, they have acquired distinctive and specialised skills in campaign management. As Tim Gartrell put it:

You've got to be skilled and understand how a campaign works. You've got to understand the role of strategy, the role of focus groups, advertising, the party, how it all fits together. It's quite a complex puzzle to put together. I'd argue that's a pretty reasonable professional achievement.

The ceaseless process of technological innovation, particularly since the advent of television, has provided campaign managers with new tools and techniques for communication, market research and information processing. Thus the technical complexity of the work of campaign management has steadily increased: campaign managers need to appraise the potential implications of each new tool and where appropriate to adapt them for campaign purposes. All this occurs within a context of resource scarcity, where choices need to be made between the strategically desirable and the financially affordable. Two Labor officials summarised these constraints in defining their role:

Professionalisation is about disciplined application of resources to election campaigning and the development of the opportunities that modern technology gives you to run campaigns of a sort ... inconceivable before (McMullan).

I do regard myself as a professional. A professional does their job to the best of their abilities given the resources they've got, that's how I view it (Bitar).

Part of the expertise of campaign managers may arise from formal education: most of the party officials are university graduates. Yet Gartrell is probably speaking for many when he asserted that formal qualifications are less relevant than practical training: "Coming up through the [labour] movement is really important." The real basis of their professional expertise is practical long-term experience of campaign management:

(A professional is) someone who permanently works on it – doesn't just get involved in a campaign (without) that reservoir of experience and skill obtained over a long period of time (Crosby).

Practicing those skills at the highest level over a long period, developing confidence in my judgement based on what I knew, on what would and wouldn't work. ... You just acquire skills by practice (Walsh).

I'm a great believer that experience matters in these jobs. There's no other job quite like them and there's no adequate external preparation really (Loughnane).

I absolutely loved the campaigning. Being state organiser and working in the party office is about the worst job in the world, it is so full-on. ... I threw myself into it. It

was hard, hard work. I loved the campaigning - absolutely loved the campaigning (Bitar).

Practical experience breeds not just technical expertise but judgement as well – what Robb called “that appropriate mix of the science and the art.” According to Brian Loughnane, professional skills include “judgement and character”:

You can be technically equipped in a “what do you look for in a good advertisement” sense, but these other demands can be very – that’s where the rubber hits the road.

It is this technical competence – rather than, for example, factional alignment or directive of the parliamentary leader – that qualifies the professional to lead the party’s Head Office. Where the elected representatives provide democratic representation, accountability and advocacy, and the branch member participation and grass roots connection, the party official contributes technical expertise, disciplined resource allocation and clinical understanding of voter behaviour. The repercussions should not be underestimated. Campaign management has become a scientific-rational exercise; passion and vision have been saddled with method and research; hunches have given way to effectiveness-measurement:

In the end you’re running a professional outfit if you can measure the effectiveness of a lot of what you do. I thought in the end we were able to see where we had performed well and where we hadn’t. We had some reasonable capacity to judge the effectiveness of our direct mail for instance (Robb).

It’s understanding what motivates voters and being able to measure and respond to it, ... and having an established methodology. Politics involves people and people have their different hopes and aspirations, so it’s not about dehumanising it, it’s just putting a structure and process and – what’s the opposite of professional? amateur – not being amateurish: not thinking we can design a leaflet and we’ll win. It’s getting to the core of what really drives people and responding in a professional way to that (Crosby).

The party officials seek not only to bring this professional approach to their own work, but to impose it on the rest of the campaign apparatus. Crosby described the campaign professional as a “quality controller,” developing an understanding of voter behaviour that is rational, “clinical” or “rigorous” instead of the more emotionally charged or anecdotal approach of the elected politicians:

One of the problems of politics ... [is that] everyone has their view and a theory. All too often people operate on anecdote rather than reality. It’s very hard, particularly for a lot of politicians, to be sufficiently clinical - because they’re caught up in it – [about] what needs to be done and what’s happening. In a way you’re a quality controller, because you’re trying to get to the core of things, because you’ve got to get people [i.e. voters] to behave in a particular way.

Walsh put it in similar terms. Describing the review of Labor’s organisation after the heavy defeat of 1977, he said the party’s raw political character was hindering its ability to perform the more technical aspects of campaigning:

It was felt that the party needed people who could bring professional communications and research skills to the organisation – which had raw politics in abundance but it wasn’t proving to be the answer to winning elections.

This replacement of “raw politics” with new skills of communications and research, embodied in the professional party official, exemplifies the process of campaign professionalisation.

Professionals serve their client. The work of the political professional is focussed beyond their own immediate political, financial or personal interests. The defining hallmark of their professionalism is service to their political party, of which they are members and employees, and in whose service their professional expertise has been developed. Specifically, they are devoted to promoting and securing its best interests, which they define as electoral success. McMullan expressed it succinctly:

We’re not running a debating society where the significant thing is, ‘How much chance did I get to speak?’ We’re running a political party that aspires to govern the country. ... [The] fundamental drivers, the thing that distinguishes [the ALP] from other organisations you run, is that its job, its only real job, is to win the election.

Crosby likewise defined his role as stewardship:

As the [Liberal] Federal Director you are a steward of the party’s interest. Well so is the [federal] president, but you are the professional. You are there every day. You have a job to protect the party’s interests. While leaders come and go, the party goes on forever. So you’ve got an obligation to ensure the party continues to be strong and has continuity (Crosby).

These political professionals are exclusive in their partisan attachment. There are very few examples of party officials crossing party lines to help the ‘other’ party. Their partisanship is rarely expressed as personal commitment to specific policies or leaders; rather, they are committed to the electoral success of the party as a whole. The Labor official Karl Bitar, asked if it were possible on the basis of technical knowledge to do the job of his Liberal opposite number Brian Loughnane, replied:

Probably I could, yes, why not? If you gave me enough time. ... Could Brian come and run my campaign? I have no doubt. ... *You wouldn’t do it but you could*, because you are a professional at campaigning (emphasis added).

Here, the professional’s technical expertise is trumped by the professional ethics of client service. These inherent tensions were also discussed by another Labor official, Gary Gray who – alone of the interviewed party officials - rejected the description of himself as a professional. Gray was uneasy about what the term implied about his motives and commitment as a partisan. In Weberian terms, Gray lived *from* politics: he had been involved in managing Labor Party campaigns at territory, state and Federal levels for more than a decade, had pioneered Labor’s direct mail campaigning in the late 1980s and was a determined and successful fundraiser for Labor campaigns. Yet he also lived *for* politics, as a passionate Labor partisan. He thus insisted his professional involvement with Labor should not be understood solely as a campaign manager and could not be separated from his partisan commitment:

I’m not really sure what [the term professional] means, which is why I struggle a little bit.

Q: What do you mean by it? A: I got paid for doing political work. For me, my time as a party official (was) driven not by the fact that I got paid for doing it. It [was] driven by a very deep passion and a commitment to the agenda.

Q: You think professionalism implies a lack of personal commitment because you're paid? A: I think professionalism can sometimes be taken to mean you're a gun for hire. A good political professional is a professional partisan.

Though Gray was the only one to express it in these terms, all the campaign managers identified themselves as partisans, committed to advancing the interests of their party by securing its electoral success. The economic returns and career aspirations of living from politics are not incompatible with – indeed, as these interviews suggest, they are closely caught up with – the wholehearted partisanship and vocational motivations of living for politics.

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The research interviews thus provided a working definition: campaign managers of Australia's political parties are professional insofar as they are paid, highly skilled in campaigning, and client-focused. The emergence of such individuals within their party organisations can be understood as the process of professionalisation. Yet this was not a simple substitution of, for example, an ageing cohort of non-professional managers with a younger cohort with more modern ideas or more formal training. In professionalising the parties' conduct of election campaigns, the professional campaign managers were engaged in a disruptive process of institutional transformation. Prioritising electoral success, they challenged long-standing rules and conventions and introduced new ideas, work practices, organisational arrangements and identities. Professionalisation disrupted all the party's actors – branch members, party officials in the state party organisations, and elected representatives – and sharpened the differences between the “three faces” of the party, as the “central office” sought to extend its professionalising influence at the expense of the party members “on the ground” and the party “in public office” (Key 1964, Katz & Mair 1993). Indeed, professionalisation disrupted the “central office” itself, as the paid officials in the national office took on their counterparts in the state offices and sought influence over their own elected presidents, treasurers, and central executive committees. The research interviews provided detailed insights into this disruptive transformation and the role of the party officials in it. Three principal themes emerged.

First, professionalisation required *centralised campaign management*. Before the 1970s, each party had managed election campaigns in a decentralised way, with responsibilities dispersed among parliamentary leaders, conferences and caucuses, state party officials, local candidates and branch members. Coming into Labor's national head office in 1963, Wyndham recalled that “the left hand never knew what the right hand was doing.” From the 1970s, the parties' national head offices seized responsibility for campaign management from their state-based counterparts and vested authority for a nationally coordinated campaign in the new role of national campaign director. National head offices were strengthened and expanded with in-house professional appointments and an expanding cast of external marketing specialists. Centralised campaign management permitted efficient usage of party resources and consistent and unified campaign communications which, at a time when national media networks were emerging, rewarded those parties capable of using national television broadcasting to mount nationally consistent campaigns.

Second, professionalisation required *strategic planning*. Having centralised, the national head office took on strategic responsibilities: designing a campaign strategy aimed at electoral success and ensuring its efficient and disciplined implementation through all the party's campaign activities. In the words of Briand Loughnane, “What is required to win the election

and what do we have to do? Answering that question is the strategy.” Through market research, professional campaign managers sought to develop the most persuasive messages, to target them to the most strategically marginal seats and to the swinging voters within them, and to use the most appropriate communications media to reach them. New protocols were established to ensure public statements by candidates and elected MPs were centrally approved – while thanks to intensive monitoring of media outlets, inconsistencies in statements by the opposition party could be detected and exploited. Campaign management, in Geoff Walsh’s words, was about “constructing a core message ... that actually works or works as well as they can for you” and then “trying to get as much as possible of what you do funnelling back to focus onto those things. So it’s more about discipline and focus.”

Third, professionalisation required *new levels of financial resources*. Traditional sources of party funding – membership subscriptions, business donations and trade union affiliation fees – had been divided, often acrimoniously, among the state branches and, in any event, proved inadequate to meet the research and advertising costs of the emerging professional campaign model. Professional campaigners in the national head office took responsibility for raising the necessary funds, freeing the national party of its mendicant dependency on the states and harnessing the donations of business, individuals and taxpayers in a competitive “arms race” of fundraising (Anderson and Tham 2014). They chased donors in boardrooms, union offices and cocktail functions; they built revenue streams through property portfolios, tenancy agreements and mortgages; they solicited funds through direct mail and donor databases and, more recently call centres and email. At the same time they were responsible for campaign budgeting and spending, employing staff, hiring external consultants, negotiating multi-million dollar media buys and building websites; one of his “key jobs,” according to Brian Loughnane, was “the allocation of scarce resources.”

These imperatives of professionalisation – centralisation, strategizing and fundraising - proceeded over many decades. Different elements of the professional campaign model were put in place depending on the available technology and resources, on the changing opportunities presented to parties in government or in opposition, and on the dynamics of competitive emulation as each party strove to catch-up with and surpass the achievements of the other. Key turning points included the creation of paid national party officials in the 1940s, the formulation of marginal seat strategies in the early 1950s, and the burst of professionalisation in the early 1970s surrounding Labor’s “It’s Time” campaign, including the appointment of the first national campaign director and the implementation of research-driven national campaigns of television advertising. Subsequent developments included the introduction of public funding for parties in the 1980s, the use by governing parties of qualitative (“focus group”) research in the 1980s and 1990s and of direct mail in the 1980s. More recently the advent of digital communications has permitted web-based and social media campaigning and, in the current phase, the emergence of data-based micro-targeting campaigns. In other words, professionalisation is a continuing and incremental process of institutional change.

Professionalisation did not however proceed on a smooth forward trajectory. Professional campaign management displaced the enthusiastic amateurs and volunteers in the party’s grassroots; it threatened the traditional prerogatives of state campaign managers; and it sought to harness candidates, elected MPs and the parliamentary leadership whose itineraries, scripts and even policy commitments were subjected to the overarching disciplines of the campaign strategy. In response, these actors resisted and challenged the new disciplines. It shifted the focus of election campaigns from informed deliberation and choice by voters to strategic calculation by central managers and this, too, caused resentment and defections. Its

voracious financial appetite led to debt and deficit and regular requests for further taxpayer assistance and this too hampered the adoption of the professional campaign model. Yet over time it came to dominate the life of the political parties. Thus, to answer the questions posed by Lilleker and Negrine, professionalisation appears to be a valid and useful term to describe a process of institutional change in which, in the Australian context, political parties' election campaign management has been steadily transformed over many decades by the adaptive work of their professional campaign managers.

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