
MARKETING PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

Dr. John Uhr
Politics Program, Research School of Social Sciences,
Australian National University

Political Fictions

Whoever gave me this topic of 'marketing parliamentary committees' must have been thinking of that great current example of modern marketing, Harry Potter. The 14th of July 2000 was Harry Potter day, with the Australian publication of the latest work in the remarkably successful series of novels written by J. K. Rowling, dealing with the life and times of the fictional child-hero, Harry Potter. The Potter series of books tells us the hard truth about marketing: by comparison, parliamentary committees have no chance of getting their reports into the best-seller lists, not even if their reports and record of evidence was rewritten by a celebrated author like J. K. Rowling.

The Potter series is the marketing event of our times: within just four years, the quiet and retiring author of this series of books has been catapulted into the front rank of marketing achievements. What is the lesson for parliamentary committees in this real-life experience of the marvels of marketing? I think that we can get a better grip on this topic of marketing parliamentary committees if we compare our marketing hopes with some marketing realities. We should spend just a little moment putting what *we* know - the world of parliamentary committees - into context through comparison with the genuine marketing article, represented by the Harry Potter impact.

Now I happen to believe that there is some overlap between the Harry Potter works of fiction and much of what is written about Parliament. You might think that I have in mind that other Harry - Harry Evans - who is our conference dinner speaker, but you would be mistaken. Nothing that Clerk of the Senate contributes is fictional: imaginative perhaps, always colourful, but never fictional. This commitment to

telling the truth perhaps explains why our Harry is not yet high on the list of the rich and the famous, as J. K. Rowling most certainly is. But, then again, perhaps you think that I really mean to refer *Odgers' Australian Senate Practice* or maybe the solid and reliable *House of Representatives Practice*, but again no: although both have been accused of a little bit of political fiction, neither has attracted the marketing gurus in the way that real fiction about Witches (a topic of the Potter series) trumps Westminster.

I will leave until later revealing the interesting overlap between works of fiction and the work of Parliament. Suffice to say that when fiction writers get their sights fixed on Parliament, no amount of marketing can save its reputation. It has happened before, and can happen again. The best advice for the friends of parliament is not to try to overdo the temptations of marketing, for fear that this might spark the interest of those real marketing geniuses, the writers of fiction, who will make fun of us all. Why so? Because fiction is marketable and much of the work of Parliament is not.

The dull truths of law and policy contained in reports of parliamentary committees are, although important, often virtually unreadable, let alone marketable. I speak from personal experience, as a former committee secretary who has written just such reports. My fear is that unless we, as the friends of Parliament, can come up with an insider's guide to promoting parliamentary committees, we will be overtaken by clever outsiders more interested in getting publicity by *demoting* rather than *promoting* our cause. These outsiders might be political scientists or political journalists or, worse still, political novelists - and here I do have an example, local-grown too, to be revealed in my conclusion.

Three Suggestions

But all that is for later. Let me put forward three positive suggestions about how best to market parliamentary committees.

The first one is the usual academic note of caution: it is that 'marketing' is probably not the right term to use when we are really thinking of how best to promote public understanding of, and participation in, the committee process. For us, the very process of 'marketing' might be a distraction from the real business of committees, which is not their bonding with the public but their buffeting of Government. One of the core markets of parliamentary committees is inside Parliament itself, delivering a message (or 'product' if you want to think in terms of marketing) to the political executive. That fundamental marketing strategy is designed to get the attention of the political executive and it should not be allowed to lapse, regardless of the virtues of building up community support outside the garrisons of government.

My second suggestion is related to this. This is the idea that the secret of success for committee operations and their impact on Government is not to 'take the Parliament to the people' as that old and still useful phrase puts it, but through new incentives to bring the people to Parliament. Building bridges to greater community participation is excellent: but to my mind the best bridge is one that is built by committees that exercise their parliamentary muscle within the political process - before they go wandering down marketing tracks to bring attention to themselves. I have examples that I will mention shortly, to prove my point that a committee that puts the heat on

the Government will start to get the wider community interest that marketing consultants like to promise.

The test is simple: just think of which types of parliamentary committees generate the most media publicity and you probably have a committee that has already got the attention of Government. This is not a certain test of an effective committee, because it is quite true that a media-driven committee might simply annoy or for that matter flatter the powers that be. But the examples that I have in mind are of committees that do more than chase publicity; they chase the facts about Government performance and that chase can, when done competently, bring media and wider public attention just as effectively as an expensive marketing strategy. I concede that Government will eventually take seriously a committee that has developed a strong public profile, but I have to say that history works the other way: committees that *initially* get the attention of Government are the ones that *later* get the media publicity and subsequent community interest.

My third and final suggestion is that the last thing that I would recommend in any marketing or promotion scheme is a program of activity designed to present this or that parliamentary committee as a model of the marketable political product. There is a real temptation to think that if only 'folks out there' better understood what we on this or that parliamentary committee did, then all would be well. As a former committee secretary, I have plenty of examples in my own professional career of committees, and indeed secretaries, who believed that they were marketable. The committees, at least, have stayed the distance longer than the ambitious secretaries.

The more I reflect on this dream of marketability, the more I see the better sense of selling *ideas* rather than concrete *institutions*. The marketing belief is that if only the community knew what good work we on this or that committee were really doing, then we would be growing our market and paving the way to sustainable public participation. This urge to 'grow the market' is tempting but misguided: it lets the current institutions get in the way of the core idea. What is that core idea? It is the idea that the community should appreciate that it owns the system of parliamentary democracy that our institutions try to live up to. Even when those institutions are imperfect, as is the case with most parliamentary committees (and, I confess, most universities), the institutions can still carry the greater power of the idea: the idea of parliamentary democracy.

I have much experience with many admirable parliamentary committees, but the cause of promoting the larger business of parliamentary democracy means that the 'product' being marketed or promoted is the core idea, democracy, and not the imperfect institution. 'Grow the market' by all means, but 'grow the market' for more active, participative and deliberative democracy (Uhr 1998). Resist the temptation to market this or that committee as though they are the very models of democracy. They will never be this unless they get their core business right, which is trying to improve the way we do government, the ways we govern ourselves. If they can demonstrate their productivity doing that, then they deserve our help as 'products' or processes worthy of promotion.

Some Examples of Positive Practice

So much for my three cents worth about ‘marketing parliamentary committees’. Now let me reinforce each of the three suggestions with a few practical illustrations, before concluding with my warning about the greater marketing power of political fiction. My belief is that unless those of us working in and around the parliamentary system can produce better, more interesting and citizen-friendly writings about the parliamentary process, then maybe we should retire from the field. We could then leave it to those like J K Rowling who can spin a good yarn that puts Parliament in perspective. The example that I have in mind here is an old one but a good one, and of course a Queensland one, that pits the honest outsider against a rotten Parliament which is held up to public ridicule. If such a powerful writer were to return to his or her craft, our task as marketers would be uphill work, trying to counter the story that somehow got out, which is that parliamentary politics is a pretty much a joke.

Internal marketing: making government responsive

Let me take an example of a parliamentary committee that would be a nightmare to a marketing consultant. I am thinking of estimates committees: formally, legislative committees reviewing a government’s core legislative initiative, which is the annual budget. My examples are drawn from the national Parliament in Canberra but the general principles probably apply across Australia. New Zealand might be the exception in that I sense that its estimates process is a more influential exercise in legislative change. The marketing gurus would not go out of their way to take on the job of trying to devise a marketing strategy for Australian estimates committees.

For a start, our estimates committees have no *public* market. It is difficult to grow the business when the public is not even invited to attend. Estimates committees do not bother that much with inviting witnesses. For all the complaints of public servants, it is worth recalling that they appear at the request of ministers as their assistants. The presence of officials is welcomed by the committees, but on the understanding that should ministers want to take all the answers themselves (a dream of public servants that never seems to become a reality), then so they may. Estimates committees do not present well for marketing consultants: no public in attendance, although they are welcome to come and watch if they can ever find the right location and the right time. Those who do stray in quickly establish that the estimates committees work without an agenda of business and a firm timetable, making the marketing next to impossible if one wanted to let the media or the community know beforehand what would be discussed when.

Compared to most parliamentary committees, staff are hard to locate. There is not the usual crew of able researchers, although most participating elected members have their own personal staff clued in to the process, ready to market any mistakes that drop from the lips of Government. And when we ask what actually results from this budget review, the marketing guru will grimace when told that actually no estimates committee ever really changed any budget item, despite all their curious interest in the economics of pot-plants and minor office expenses. Again, perhaps New Zealand is an important exception. So, no agenda, no staff, and most importantly no results, and in many cases not much by way of a report: clearly, not the stuff of marketing greatness.

But the news is that these are exactly the type of committees that the media are now targeting. My recent Canberra examples relate to the quite extensive media reliance on the exchanges between committee members and public servants over such hot potatoes as: the 'Unchain My Heart' exercise in political marketing to promote the GST; the policy and direction of the Australian Taxation Office in handling tax cheats; and the use of the Australian Electoral Commission's voter lists to help the Government again market its GST message. These were major issues of public expenditure closely affecting a very fundamental policy initiative. But the estimates process was really the only place on the public record where one could find an examination of the legal and policy appropriateness of the government's own marketing strategy.

Taxation is about as close as one gets to the heart of government. And the media had nowhere better to turn than estimates committees when trying to get at the facts of government performance: certainly the fancy new world of outputs-based accrual financial reporting contributed little. I want to emphasise that I think that much could be done to improve the effectiveness of estimates processes (see e.g. Uhr 1998, 191-2). But my point here is that original warning about taking too seriously the expectation that committees as a matter of necessity ought to do more by way of marketing.

Think instead of the significance that the media increasingly relies on estimates process to get at the facts of Government performance. To my mind, this should tell us that external marketing is not the most important requirement when it comes to making these committees effective: external marketing would in fact get in the way of doing their business, with all its focus on detail and degree. Yet when former Ministers of the calibre of Robert Ray and John Faulkner swing into action, the Government starts listening. And by doing their core business, estimates committees are now getting increasing publicity from those in the media who want to know more from secretive Governments spending huge amounts of public expenditure on political marketing. So, to my mind estimates committees are just the thing, when one wants to take the lid off misguided marketing in government. Indeed, government marketing is on the nose, and for good reasons. I suspect that public interest in estimates processes will steadily increase as the media increasingly draws attention to committee exchanges with Ministers and their officials.

Building Constituencies

One of the greatest challenges facing the development of parliamentary committees is the market resistance of Governments. I do not have with me the exact figures but my strong impression is that, over the life of the current Government since 1996, very, very few reports from House of Representatives parliamentary committees have got a response from Ministers within the promised three month timetable (Wanna and Uhr). This puts us in a bit of chicken and egg situation: would the political executive pay more attention to committee reports if greater public interest were devoted to committees, or would that increased public interest come about once the community appreciated that committees exercise leverage over Government? The mainstream marketers tend to opt for the first approach: get the committees out and about building up a constituency and the influence over Government will follow. I tend to take the alternative option: let the committees get their internal priorities right and the external

constituency will follow. I am sure that there is plenty of room for sensible positions between these stark alternatives.

But if my impression of unresponsive Governments is correct, then what forms of *internal* marketing might committees experiment with to grow the business internally with an eye to making Governments more responsive? The essential trick I think is to build a constituency that can do some of that work for you. What works for estimates committees is the self-interest of the media in getting access to what is really driving Government: the media becomes a kind of constituency: not one to be represented but one that can carry on the work of committees to help keep Governments responsive.

Other types of committees have to look around for their own distinctive type of constituency. For example, committees with responsibilities for public accounts or public expenditure can get the attention of Governments by resort to non-government sources of expertise in performance reporting: traditionally such bodies as the Auditor-General, whose reports are about the only things that Governments now respond to with speed. But in more contemporary terms this traditional type of constituency can be expanded to include the growing body of high profiled consultancy firms engaged in public finance. They need the committees even more than the committees need them, to give them a market edge and to promote their own publicity. Other types of committees can build relevant constituencies to accredit their activities: many committees now work through roundtables of experts and professional associations which are good examples of bringing the people to Parliament, which is frequently better than the idealistic alternative of taking Parliament to the people.

Examples of committees that have sharpened their leverage over Government through constituency-building include: the Senate finance and public administration committee with its regular roundtables in public administration; the Victorian federal-state relations committee with its federalism update conferences; even the legislative scrutiny committees with their own brand of home-grown constituency that comes through their national collaboration as a network monitoring national legislative schemes.

Many marketing gurus will tell you to take the committee to the people, to get out of Parliament House and go on public tour where the community can have better access to the parliamentary process. This can make sense but only as an adjunct to the core business of internal marketing, which might involve bringing selected groups and individuals to the Parliament. I realise that inviting selected 'publics' carries the risk of insider-trading and anti-democratic elitism (see Uhr 1998, 224-7). But when done with due public responsibility, this form of internal marketing stands in bold contrast to the passive path of 'going bush', hoping that people will turn out, as though the committee was as attractive as the Olympic torch.

Promoting Democracy

My third suggestion was to think in terms of *ideas* rather than *institutions*. Internationally, this is where the action is, particularly for parliaments wanting to take their message to the larger international world. Early July 2000 saw the great experiment of 'The World Forum of Democracies' held in Warsaw. This was a collection of all the world's democracies: all 120 or so of the 'electoral democracies',

including many from the Commonwealth's 54 member states. This was the latest phase in the most fascinating international movement of our time, which is the promotion of democracy globally, which has gathered pace in the decade since the collapse of communism.

Australia was at the table in Warsaw as were the 119 other electoral democracies. Few of the established democracies have such a high reputation internationally as Australia for sustainable democracy. The established democracies all have very active government programs to promote democratic developments: democracy assistance is an increasingly important part of international relations. And legislative assistance is an increasingly important part of democracy assistance: Australia along with many others spends substantial sums around the globe marketing democracy and, in particular, marketing Parliament. But none of the donor-democracies at the Warsaw Forum of Democracies would dream of promoting their own particular institutional arrangements in preference to working with developing democracies to help them cement the democratic idea within their own social circumstances. This is perhaps the biggest exercise in political marketing now under way anywhere in the world. The important point for today is that the secret of any success in 'exporting democracy' is seen to be marketing the core concept of democratic self-government, and not the selling of the particular institutional arrangements that the donor-democracy happens to have devised within their own national setting.

Among the most active promoters of democracy are the great multinational organisations that bind the globe together: such as the World Bank with its new commitment to 'good governance' and the Commonwealth Secretariat with its 'Deepening Democracy' project. They all have come to the same conclusion: by all means open up specific institutions as case studies in democratic governance and by all means take pride in those institutional arrangements that can demonstrate their contribution to more effective democracy. But the real lesson is that in the marketing of democracy, the secret of 'growing the business' of democracy, is to put the idea ahead of the institution. The real driver of political change is the concept of democracy which has proven its worth as the most marketable idea this century.

Marketing through mockery

To come to my Conclusion and reveal the identity of the writer who stands as the exemplar of our marketing rival for public attention. This is a story that grows out of the Queensland Parliament. Many Australians will remember the 'Dad and Dave' series of comic novels written by Steele Rudd. Steele Rudd was in real life Arthur Hoey Davis, a great Queenslander who was foundation secretary of the State Shorthand Writers Association. He was under-sheriff of the Queensland Supreme Court when he wrote the most relevant of the Dad and Dave series, called *Dad in Politics*.

This work was published in 1908 and so it has survived longer (so far!) than any of the Harry Potter books. Steele Rudd can stand as our rival publicist whose book *Dad in Politics* represents the challenge of parliamentary *demotion* that probably is more publicly interesting than any of our efforts in parliamentary *promotion*. Not for Steele Rudd the world of parliamentary committees: his main character is the member for Eton who is elected 'to go to Brisbane to put the sufferances of the farmers plainly'.

The member for Eton was something of an independent spirit, sitting on the cross-benches but capable of getting his way. He ‘used plain language, and didn’t quote statistics or poetry or scripture’ but then again he ‘wasn’t a humbug nor a sham’ (*Dad in Politics*, p.4).

Dad in Politics shows us the getting of wisdom of the member for Eton. The book paints a picture of parliament as a rogues’ gallery. The homely Dad there encounters drunkenness on the floor of the Chamber, gets into a boxing match with another member again on the floor of the chamber, finds that his speaking rights are unprotected by the Speaker whenever the ministry want to silence him, discovers that merit-based public employment is no match for nepotism, and much more that makes a joke of Parliament. All this of course was written well before the modern era of committee activism. But there is still enough here to raise a laugh about the pretensions of our Parliaments and to warn us that fiction-writers can and will beat us every time in a race between their novels and our marketing plans.

Just in case there is another Steele Rudd in the wings, we should remember that we are effectively on notice: to tell the public what really is the state of things in our Parliaments or face the penalty of having to try to roll-back the tears of laughter that a humourist like Rudd can trigger. It all started here in this very Queensland Parliament, and it could happen again. Best for us to stick to the basics and not get too distracted with abstract plans for marketing, when what our market really wants is evidence that parliamentary committees are at work doing their best to improve what passes for parliamentary democracy. Otherwise the joke will be on us.

References

- Rudd, Steele (1908/1968). *Dad in Politics*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Uhr, John (1998). *Deliberative Democracy in Australia: The Changing Place of Parliament*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Wanna, John and Uhr, John (2000). ‘The Future Roles of Parliament’, ch. 3 in M. Keating and P. Weller eds *Institutions on the Edge? Capacity for Governance*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000 (forthcoming).