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The Small Target Trap: Why Silence Is Surrender in a Media-Hostile Political Environment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The small target strategy is a high-risk, low-reward tactic when deployed by opposition parties operating in a media-hostile environment. While it has proven conditionally effective for incumbents or parties with narrative momentum and mainstream media support, its application by an opposition lacking independent narrative control produces a predictable result: voter disengagement, adversarial caricature, and strategic paralysis.

This brief argues that narrative silence is not neutral in a biased media ecosystem — it is filled by adversarial framing. Drawing on Australian electoral outcomes, comparative international cases, and the cognitive science of political decision-making, we propose a replacement framework built on narrative saturation, emotional anchoring, and strategic counterframing. The era of logic-first, low-exposure opposition politics is structurally over. The question is how quickly this is recognised.

1. The Problem: Narrative Vacuum as Political Liability

In a balanced or sympathetic media environment, minimising exposure can protect frontrunners from unforced errors. The calculus is straightforward: if the default narrative favours you, do nothing to disrupt it. But this logic inverts entirely in a media-hostile setting. An opposition party that minimises its exposure does not reduce its risk — it transfers narrative control to its opponents.

Peter Dutton's 2025 Coalition campaign illustrates the mechanism precisely. The campaign entered the contest with genuine structural advantages: public fatigue with the incumbent government, sustained cost-of-living anxiety, and polling leads that reflected dissatisfaction with Labor rather than enthusiasm for the Coalition. Those leads were soft — built on negative sentiment that required narrative conversion into positive commitment. The small target approach ensured that conversion never occurred.

Without a proactive narrative, three things happened simultaneously. First, the media — operating from a culturally progressive baseline — filled the vacuum with its own characterisation of the Coalition's silence: hesitancy, weakness, and absence of vision. Second, Labor ran an uncontested emotional campaign, saturating the field with empathy and care narratives. Third, undecided voters — who were never going to engage detailed policy costings — had no emotional reason to switch. They felt nothing from the Coalition. That is not neutrality. That is a loss.

In a hostile media environment, narrative silence is not strategic caution. It is a surrender of the emotional field to an opponent who will occupy it immediately and permanently.

2. The Cognitive Architecture of Political Passivity

The small target strategy implicitly assumes a rational electorate — one that will hold negative sentiment about an incumbent, evaluate the available alternative on policy merits, and make a deliberate switching decision. This model of voter behaviour is inconsistent with the evidence accumulated over three decades of cognitive and behavioural political science.

Kahneman and Tversky's dual-process theory establishes that political judgments are dominated by System 1 thinking: fast, automatic, emotion-led, and operating on heuristics rather than analysis. System 2 — deliberative, logical — engages only when System 1 has already produced an orientation. A party that does not engage System 1 never activates System 2 consideration in its favour.

Haidt's moral foundations theory adds the structural dimension relevant to conservative politics specifically. Conservative moral intuitions — loyalty, authority, sanctity, fairness — are real and potent motivators. But they must be emotionally activated before they can generate political action. Policy positions that are consistent with these values but are presented in purely technical terms do not activate them. The emotional connection must precede the rational argument.

Media bias compounds this structural problem. With journalists broadly aligned to progressive cultural values, political neutrality from a conservative party is not interpreted as statesmanship. It is interpreted as either weakness or moral inadequacy — and that interpretation is then transmitted at scale through platforms that the conservative opposition does not control. Silence is not invisible in this environment. It is actively hostile.

3. Case Studies: When the Small Target Fails, and When It Doesn't

Australia 2025: Dutton's Structural Defeat

The 2025 result was not primarily a defeat on policy. The Coalition's platform — on economic management, border security, and fiscal discipline — was internally coherent. The defeat was a failure of emotional communication in a media environment that was structurally hostile to conservative narratives and actively amplified Labor's.

Labor's campaign flooded the zone with stories of empathy, national healing, and personal concern for households under economic stress. Albanese ran on feeling, consistently. Dutton ran on facts. The fuel excise reduction — a meaningful cost-of-living measure — was communicated in a way that generated no emotional response and was easily caricatured as insufficient or time-limited. Border security, which carries genuine emotional resonance around sovereignty and community safety, was presented as a management challenge rather than an identity claim.

Exit polling found that undecided voters felt Labor "cared more," and that Coalition messaging was "unclear" or "missing." These are not policy evaluations. They are emotional verdicts — and they were rendered in the absence of any sustained effort to contest the emotional field.

UK 2019: Corbyn's Brexit Evasion

Jeremy Corbyn's 2019 Labour campaign attempted a version of the small target on Brexit — deliberately ambiguous, designed to avoid alienating either Remain or Leave voters. The outcome was catastrophic. Voters read the ambiguity as either dishonesty or indecision. Neither reading generated trust or enthusiasm.

The Conservative campaign, by contrast, ran a single emotionally clear message: "Get Brexit Done." It did not require detailed explanation. It did not invite logical interrogation. It activated a

large reservoir of accumulated frustration with parliamentary stalemate and converted it directly into political action. The lesson is not that simplicity always wins. It is that emotional clarity, in a contested and media-hostile environment, consistently outperforms strategic ambiguity.

Australia 2013: Why Abbott's Small Target Worked — and Why the Parallel Fails

Tony Abbott's 2013 campaign is the standard reference point for successful small target strategy in Australian politics. The comparison to 2025 is superficially plausible but analytically weak on three critical dimensions.

First, the media environment in 2013, while not uniformly sympathetic to the Coalition, was more balanced than the contemporary landscape. The structural bias that now characterises the dominant institutional media — ABC, metropolitan print, and digital outlets — was less pronounced. Second, Labor was in visible internal collapse. The Rudd-Gillard dysfunction was a running story that required no amplification from the opposition. Third, and most critically, Abbott had already emotionally framed the election through years of sustained opposition campaigning before the formal campaign began.

The carbon tax repeal was not presented as a fiscal adjustment. It was “axing the tax on everything” — a cost-of-living claim with direct emotional resonance for household budgets. Border protection was framed around sovereignty and national control, not administrative competence. Labor's dysfunction was framed as moral failure, betrayal of trust. Abbott's campaign may have been cautious on new policy release, but it was emotionally saturated. Dutton in 2025 had none of those conditions and none of that groundwork.

The 2013 comparison misreads what made Abbott's strategy viable. It was not the target size. It was the emotional infrastructure already in place when the formal campaign began. Without that infrastructure, a small target is simply a small presence.

4. The Strategic Insight: Small Target Is Not Strategy — It Is An Absence of Strategy

Political campaigns require narrative saturation. When adversarial media dominate the emotional field, silence ensures defeat. The lesson is clear: emotional resonance must precede logical argument.

Opposition parties must own their identity and proactively construct the battlefield, not wait for invitations. Voters do not need more information — they need something to feel.

Equally important, the campaign does not begin when the election writs are issued — it begins in the years prior, when parties shape public perception, define their moral identity, and seed emotional narratives that can withstand scrutiny. Polling leads in the pre-election phase often reflect dissatisfaction with government, not support for opposition. In an election season, especially with a hostile press, those soft leads dissolve unless the party has already framed the issues and built popular, principled positions that resonate emotionally and endure rational interrogation.

A successful campaign must begin with long-term emotional narrative framing, so that when the formal contest begins, the opposition is already fighting on ground it has chosen — and which the public instinctively understands and supports.

Moreover, narrative saturation must be rooted in authentic values. Emotional anchoring cannot simply follow the polls — it must align with the enduring principles and instincts of the party. When the emotional themes reflect the party's core identity, they carry greater resonance, legitimacy, and resistance to media distortion. Strategic messaging built on hollow or opportunistic sentiment collapses under scrutiny; principled emotional clarity is both a shield and a sword.

5. The New Playbook: Narrative Saturation in Three Phases

The alternative to the small target is not reckless overexposure. It is a disciplined, phased approach to narrative construction that begins in opposition and builds the emotional foundation before the formal campaign contest begins.

Phase 1: Emotional Anchoring (In Opposition)

Select three to five emotionally potent themes grounded in genuine conservative values — not manufactured for polling purposes — and anchor all messaging consistently around them. Safety and sovereignty. Family economic security. National identity and pride. Children's futures. These are not policy positions. They are emotional orientations that policy positions can then attach to.

Narrative Clarity: Pick three emotionally potent themes (e.g., safety, cost-of-living, children's future) and anchor all messaging there. Defend vigorously.

Symbolic Storytelling: Use real Australians to tell these stories. Avoid abstraction. Convert policy into identity claims: "Defending family budgets" rather than "fiscal repair." "Protecting Australian sovereignty" rather than "border management."

Emotional Reframing: Convert policy into identity. The framing is not less accurate — it is more emotionally honest about what the policies are actually for.

Critically, this phase must run continuously in the years before an election, not in the six-week formal campaign. By the time writs are issued, the emotional narrative must already exist in public consciousness.

Phase 2: Strategic Counterframing (During Campaign)

Once the emotional foundation is established, the campaign period should be used for three specific activities.

Media Diversion: Flood alternative channels — podcasts, independent digital platforms, regional radio — that are not structurally hostile to conservative framing. These channels have substantial reach and are not subject to the editorial filtering that distorts conservative messaging through mainstream outlets.

Inoculate Attacks: Pre-empt predictable slurs with humour or authenticity. Mock the caricature. Media-hostile environments generate predictable attacks: “heartless,” “out of touch,” “extreme.” These can be anticipated and defused before they land.

Contrast Narrative: Highlight the emotional risks of the opposing agenda — loss of identity, debt burden on kids, rising disorder. These are emotional claims, not merely policy arguments, and should be deployed as such.

Phase 3: Rational Consolidation (Throughout)

Policy detail should be released only after emotional buy-in has been established — not as the primary campaign offering.

Policy Depth: Provide rational details only after emotional buy-in. Detail provides the rational scaffolding that committed supporters need to defend their position under scrutiny. It demonstrates the emotional claims are backed by substantive plans.

Feedback Loops: Use polls and town halls to test emotional impact, not just approval ratings. The question is not “do you support this policy” but “does this message make you feel something.” Adjustment should be rapid when emotional resonance is absent.

Credibility Bridging: Tie emotion to governance — “We care enough to fix it.” Ensure voters see a clear path from sentiment to action.

6. Risks and Constraints

The narrative saturation approach carries real risks that must be managed rather than ignored.

Risk: Emotional messaging may appear manipulative.

Use authentic voices and reflect core party principles. Keep tone grounded, not theatrical. Authenticity is the binding constraint — emotional messaging detached from genuine party values will be exposed as cynical and deepen rather than reduce distrust.

Risk: Media amplification of caricatures.

Own and mock the caricature. Defuse with humour or honesty. Pre-empt likely emotive opposition tactics so they are identified as manipulative when they occur. There is no vacuum to fill if the narrative space is already occupied.

Risk: Overcompensation with too many messages.

Stay disciplined — repeat three to five core emotional themes only. Proliferating messages produces incoherence, which reads as inauthenticity. Repetition is not weakness — it is how emotional narratives become embedded.

Conclusion: The Narrative Imperative for Opposition Politics

The small target strategy rests on a model of voter behaviour that the evidence does not support, in a media environment that does not permit neutral positioning, against an opponent that understands emotional politics and deploys it deliberately. It is not a strategy. It is an absence of strategy — and in a contested, hostile environment, the absence of strategy produces predictable and avoidable defeat.

The replacement is not recklessness or theatrical populism. It is a disciplined, values-rooted, emotionally-grounded approach to building the narrative foundation that political action requires. That foundation must be constructed in opposition, over years, before the formal campaign begins. By the time the election arrives, the emotional frame should already be in place — familiar, resonant, and resistant to adversarial reframing.

The 2025 result is a data point in a pattern that has now repeated across multiple Australian electoral cycles and multiple Western conservative movements. The pattern is consistent: parties that lead with emotional clarity win; parties that lead with policy detail lose. This is not a counsel of despair for evidence-based conservative governance. It is a recognition that good governance requires political power, and political power in a modern democratic environment requires emotional intelligence in its deployment.

Silence is not a shield. In a media-hostile environment, it is a surrender flag. The question is not whether to engage the emotional terrain — it is whether to do so deliberately, or to cede it by default.

References

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About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent strategic research organization dedicated to understanding, preserving, and renewing the foundations of thriving societies.

Our mission is to develop political, cultural, and social frameworks that are deeply aligned with the structures, instincts, and emotional architectures that sustain human flourishing across generations.

Our work focuses on:

- *Developing strategic whitepapers, policy briefs, and advisory documents to support effective governance and leadership.*
- *Conducting philosophical, historical, and behavioral analysis of political and cultural trends.*
- *Equipping leaders with frameworks that connect emotional resonance to rational clarity and practical governance.*

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