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Media release

Contact: Clive Hamilton (02) 6162 4140 or 0413 993 223
Josh Fear (02) 6162 4140 or 0403 424 866

Dog whistling: the dark art of Australian politics

An increasing use of the subliminal practice of political dog whistling poses threats to Australian democracy, according to a new study released today.

The study, entitled *Under the Radar: Dog-Whistle Politics in Australia*, by Australia Institute researcher Josh Fear, is the first ever comprehensive analysis of the technique.

Releasing the paper Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton said dog whistling refers to the political tactic of manipulating sectors of the population by using seemingly innocuous words for sinister purposes.

“Dog whistling allows politicians to subliminally send multiple and ambiguous messages to voters whilst denying they are doing so,” Dr Hamilton said. “It is becoming a refined art in Australia.”

The paper defines the common features of dog-whistle politics as: deniability; a select target audience; and coded, implicit or subliminal communication.

Words and phrases commonly used in dog whistling include: “Australian values”; “the guilt industry”; “the thought police”; “the black armband view of history”; “practical reconciliation”; “border protection”; and “be alert but not alarmed”.

Study author Josh Fear said: “Dog whistlers have been well-placed recently to exploit community concerns arising from overseas conflict and the threat of terrorism. They have also sought to create and inflame paranoia about minority groups and outsiders, and to taint the politics of immigration and Aboriginal affairs with parochialism and suspicion.

“If the dog whistle is done well, only the target audience has the cipher to crack the code, while those on the outside remain oblivious. Even some of its perpetrators fail to understand the extent to which this undermines democracy. Dog whistling works insidiously against the clarity and directness which is essential in political communication, because voters have to make judgments about which individual or party is best placed to represent their interests.”

Mr Fear said politicians on the conservative side of politics are more likely to use dog-whistle tactics. Politicians to the left of centre seeking to distort the truth are more likely to resort to “spin”.

“As citizens we should all question what politicians tell us, even where their messages seem benign. In recent years, many concealed messages have slipped ‘under the radar’ without question. The antidote to dog whistling - and spin - is to rigorously question politicians who say one thing but really mean another.”