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By Josh Fear, a Research Fellow at the Australia Institute, an independent public policy think tank based in Canberra:

Many of us remember the 2001 campaign as the Tampa election. Images of refugees huddled together on the deck, and then those blurry photos of kids thrown overboard that really weren't, have become icons of the politics of fear. At the time, the Prime Minister's bland statement of fact – "we decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come" – took on a new resonance in light of the twin tower bombings and the new Islamophobic atmosphere. The campaign revealed Mr Howard to be the unrivalled master of dog-whistle politics, comprehensively analysed for the first time in a new paper by the Australia Institute.

As a federal election draws closer, the Coalition is again employing underhand tactics to send an inflammatory message about race to the electorate. This time the Prime Minister's deputy dog whistler is Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews.

Last week an 18-year-old Sudanese refugee was bashed to death in a Melbourne park. Although his attackers were not themselves African, the Immigration Minister's response was to declare that "some groups don't seem to be settling into the Australian way of life". Rather than condemning the perpetrators of such senseless violence, Mr Andrews took the opportunity to question how well Africans are able to integrate. In other words, the problem is the immigrants, not the paranoia that some members of the community have about foreigners.

This episode mirrors another dog whistle in July, when Mr Andrews told the Sydney Institute that "we cannot assume that the capacity of all of our potential migrants to integrate successfully is the same as their predecessors." On the face of it, the Minister appeared to be saying that some migrants integrate into Australian society better than others. But the comments came two days after the departure of Dr Mohamed Haneef for his home country of India, following the botched investigation by the AFP into Dr Haneef's links with the Glasgow Airport bombing.

In this context, what Mr Andrews really meant by his comments was: “Our recent experiences with Muslim immigrants show that we should be wary of Muslim people – they don’t integrate well.” Of course, earlier immigrants (such as Greeks, Italians and Vietnamese) were themselves subject to paranoia and demonisation by Anglo-Australians in earlier decades – just as Muslims are today.

But with an election looming, the Minister is determined to reap electoral dividends by tapping into latent xenophobia. He was alarmingly swift in applying the “character test” when it seemed Dr Haneef might be released. This statutory instrument, with its moralising name (“is this foreigner of sufficient character to be in Australia?”), is just perfect for a well-timed dog whistle.

Over recent months, Mr Andrews has been bringing the new Australian Citizenship Test to fruition. This is a policy destined to fail utterly in its stated intention – “to help new citizens to embrace education, employment and other opportunities in Australia”, according to the Government – but succeed in sending a message to voters who are concerned about how well immigrants are able to “integrate” into Australian society. What is interesting about this initiative is how a whole policy can actually function as a dog whistle.

Let’s hope that Australians are waking up to this kind of tactic, and won’t respond positively to hidden appeals to racial suspicion. But with the Coalition so far behind in the polls, history suggests that dog-whistle politics will again be a prominent feature of its campaigning.