

From Candidate to Cabinet: The Changing Media Strategies of Marian Hobbs

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Introduction

The 1999 General Election campaign in the bellwether Wellington Central electorate was a closely fought and occasionally “dirty” race between incumbent MP and ACT leader Richard Prebble, and Labour list MP Marian Hobbs. Initially a three horse race between ACT, Labour and the Alliance (with National making an early decision not to field a candidate), and showing all the hallmarks of MMP politicking, the withdrawal of Alliance candidate Phillida Bunkle early in the campaign reduced it to a familiar First Past the Post (FPP) style contest, which Hobbs won by a margin of 1100 votes (Wellington Central gets a new MP, 1999).

Wellington Central was a critical electorate in the 1999 General Election because of the importance of the seat for Prebble and the ACT Party. Prior to the 1999 election, Prebble was the only ACT MP to hold a

constituency seat, and therefore the future success of his Party was at least partly reliant on him retaining it (under MMP, for a party to be represented in Parliament it must gain an overall 5% of the vote or at least one electorate seat). For the same reasons, the centre-left parties regarded the seat as significant because unseating Prebble could put an end to the Party's presence in Parliament, simultaneously denying National a coalition partner. It is unsurprising, then, that the electorate was the subject of national media interest, particularly in the early part of the campaign.

Despite this attention, Labour list MP Marian Hobbs elected to run a "community style" campaign (van der Kaay, 2000), rather than court media interest. This was a deliberate choice, reached after consideration of Hobbs' relatively low profile. She had been a list MP for just one term, whereas Prebble was a well-known, experienced politician and party leader. According to van Der Kaay (2000):

Hobbs knew that as a backbench MP in opposition she stood little chance of winning the seat through the media. Conversely, Prebble enjoyed a reasonably high profile and as ACT's leader was able to maximise on more media opportunities. (p.4)

Hobbs also discussed her low-key media strategy, which was based around making personal contact with as many voters as possible, with other interviewers. For example, she told Dominion reporter Nick Venter (1999):

We decided we would never beat Prebble in the headlines. He is the incumbent. He is the leader of a party. He is really well known. So we decided to do a Peter Dunne model which is to get out and talk to people...You can't go to any fair, any meeting in his area and he is not there. That is what I intend to do. (p.8)

However, beginning her second term in Parliament as a Cabinet Minister in the new Labour-Alliance coalition government proved to be a difficult transition for Hobbs. This article draws on material gained from seven face-to-face and telephone interviews with Hobbs (conducted from

June 1999 to June 2000), to explore the experiences of a list MP and female electoral candidate turned Cabinet Minister, her community-based style and low-key approach to the media, and her perceptions of media coverage during this journey. While the Wellington Central campaign and Hobbs' approach should not be considered representative of electorate campaigns or female candidates in general, this analysis contributes to our understanding of the challenges of mediated politics for women, in particular the tensions between authenticity or naturalness, and political professionalism.

This article begins by discussing Hobbs' media coverage during the 1999 election campaign, and her responses to standardised interview questions asked during this period. It then uses material gathered during a later interview, which took place after Hobbs became a Cabinet Minister, in which she considers changes in her news coverage and the impact of this on her attitude and behaviour towards the media. Following this, in the discussion section, the interview material is analysed with reference to literature on gender, news and politics. Hobbs' struggle to develop a "professional" political persona, in the glare of the media spotlight, resonates with existing literature about women's lack of confidence and anxiety about the media.

The Wellington Central Experience

A series of questions was asked about the nature of Hobbs' relationship with the news media during the local campaign. These questions focused on her contact with reporters, topics that generated media interest, planning and monitoring, and her feelings about the coverage.

In the first week of the 1999 campaign, Hobbs recalled being contacted by the media four times. Two of these were to arrange in-depth interviews, one with a local community newspaper (the Capital Times) and one with Helen Bain of the former Dominion (this newspaper has subsequently merged with the Evening Post, to become the Dominion-Post). The second research interview with Hobbs occurred after Alliance

candidate Phillida Bunkle withdrew from the race. Hobbs described herself as receiving “an excessive amount” of coverage in this period. Eight interviews resulted from nine media contacts: five of these centred around Bunkle’s withdrawal, one related to Hobbs’ comments about the importance of the party vote, one was about a forthcoming election forum and the other related to an incident which saw a Wellington port company call the Police after refusing Hobbs access to the staff canteen to address waterside workers. This period was the only time that Hobbs contacted the media herself, writing a letter to the Evening Post editor complaining about a headline which suggested Hobbs was encouraging Labour voters to give their party vote to the Alliance, and which did not match her reported comments.

In the third week of the campaign, the number of reported contacts dropped from the previous week, to six. The issues were the sausage sizzle “treating” debate (in which Hobbs was accused by National list MP Annabel Young of breaking election rules which forbid candidates from providing bribes to voters), Hobbs’ style of campaigning (in particular her street corner speeches), and broadcasting (reflecting her spokesperson role). In the last campaign interview, Hobbs recalled being contacted by the media just three times. She had a radio interview on that day, and had already spoken with the Evening Post about her response to the latest poll. She had also been contacted about the acrimony at candidate meetings in the electorate.

Throughout the campaign, Hobbs was asked to estimate how much time she spent monitoring coverage. Hobbs did no systematic monitoring, although others in her electorate team did. She read what she could, when she could, and watched television items that she knew were coming up (e.g. TV3’s story on the “treating” issue).

Each week during the campaign, Hobbs rated her weekly media coverage on a scale of “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied”. In the first week of the campaign, she was not satisfied with the electorate coverage, but this improved, possibly due to Bunkle’s withdrawal, which made it a clearer race and Hobbs a more likely winner. In general, Hobbs was

satisfied with her coverage, except for two particular incidents: the Evening Post headline that she felt distorted her message, and TV3's coverage of the "treating" issue.

In an effort to determine the perceived effect of Prebble's local incumbency on Hobbs' news coverage, she was asked to consider whether she viewed coverage to be predominantly proactive or reactive. In general, incumbency is regarded as having positive implications for media coverage, although a poor record in office is likely to put an incumbent at a disadvantage. A political candidate who does not have a pro-active media strategy is likely to end up responding to the news agenda, rather than influencing it. This tactic of not pursuing or "easing off" media contact is risky and is more often used by incumbents than challengers. For example, former Otaki MP Judy Keall explains how she used this approach:

if I've got someone standing against me and I've already gone and had my careful, pleasant, friendly interview with the editor about equal coverage, about balance...the right of reply if anyone writes a nasty letter about me...then I ease off my publicity so that my opponent can't get as much...very good technique (Fountain, 2002, p.244).

In the early stages of the campaign, Hobbs did not feel her coverage was predominantly proactive or reactive. However, in the second week when Bunkle withdrew from the seat, Hobbs felt she was tending towards reactive (Bunkle was setting the agenda, and the implications of the move were widely dissected). In the latter stages of the campaign, Hobbs perceived she was "getting more proactive", perhaps reflecting her gain in confidence as the campaign progressed. Interestingly, Hobbs did not appear to consider herself reactive to Prebble's comments or agenda.

To gain insight into Hobbs' thinking about the media, she was also asked what words described her attitude towards the news media in the previous week. In the first week, she said, "I'm more of an 'event' than a 'candidate'. Running in Wellington Central, I am mentioned in despatches". In the second week she deemed the media "insistent" and "relatively fair". By the third week she talked of "fair coverage which has warmed towards me" and felt that name recognition was increasing. In week four she felt the coverage was neutral and relatively objective, and noted, "I don't feel battered".

The issue of framing, which Hobbs was also asked about on a weekly basis during the campaign, was slightly more complex. Candidates who do not regularly monitor coverage may not have strong feelings about how the media “framed” them or the election race. Hobbs said that in the early stages of the campaign an interviewer suggested to her that she was not a suitable candidate for the seat, which she laughed at and responded, “this is ACT talking”. Later, when she was moved to write to the Evening Post about its misleading headline, she felt that the newspaper had deliberately tried to convey her comments as indicative of a deal between Labour and Alliance (i.e. suggesting there was an agreement that the Alliance would withdraw its candidate in return for Labour encouraging voters to give their party vote to the Alliance). In the latter interviews, Hobbs did not feel any particular framing had occurred in her coverage.

There was little indication that Hobbs ran a planned media campaign. At each weekly interview she was asked what her media goals were for the week ahead, and if she was planning to create media opportunities from any of the planned events. Hobbs placed a strong emphasis on direct contact with voters through targeted letters and advertising, consistent with a community-style campaign. According to one political reporter who spent time on the inside of the Hobbs’ campaign, the Wellington Central electorate has some unique characteristics, which may mean the media are a less vital communication tool. In particular it is a highly political electorate with well-attended candidate meetings. The “street corner” approach exemplified by Hobbs may work well in such electorates.

In the first weekly campaign interview Hobbs said she did not have any media goals “unless you count targeted letters and the advertising programme being finalised”. She did not send press releases, and was not planning to create any media opportunities but predicted there would be events that would “blow up” on their own. Hobbs said she would not tip off the media about the electoral forums, as she was not organising them, and noted that she was meeting with some Somali women, “but wouldn’t

impose media on them”. Hobbs admitted to being rather shy about this form of promotional media activity, and was aware of her inexperience. “I’m the world’s worst on this,” she said during the second interview. At this stage in the campaign her media goals were to work on the arts angle, and respond to Prebble. A reporter from the Evening Post was going to spend a day accompanying her on the campaign trail.

Also consistent with the idea of a “community style” campaign was Hobbs’ direct approach to voters. She said her speeches were an important vehicle for her ideas, as well as targeted letters and leaflets (with copies sent to the media). By week three, the Labour candidate was aiming to keep her name out in the public arena, in a positive way, and to smile more (noting her tendency to feel and look nervous when she saw the media approach, television especially). At this point, media opportunities for the week ahead centred around a planned rally in Civic Square, and working on “something” about the arts in Wellington. In the last of the weekly interviews, Hobbs was focused on responding to anything negative. “ACT posters calling me Comrade Marian don’t bother me but anything about me not being a good MP is countered with leaflets”.

Finally, there was an opportunity at the end of the weekly interviews for Hobbs to make any other comments. She reported having mixed feelings about the broadcast media in particular. While she enjoyed doing a story with one of the television channels, as she felt they were working with her, letting her be herself and employ her own style, her experience with the other channel was less positive, involving an interview in a noisy office, and journalists pushing the angle that Bunkle’s withdrawal was part of a “dirty deal”. On the other hand, a news interview for radio was enjoyable, as she did not feel trapped or pushed, and managed to take command.

Post-Election News Coverage

Following Hobbs’ success in Wellington Central, she became a Cabinet Minister in the new Labour-Alliance government. The impact of her changed status and negative publicity on her relationship with, and attitude towards, the news media was explored in a follow-up interview in June 2000.

In brief, Hobbs’ difficulties began in February 2000, during her first parliamentary question time. As Minister of Broadcasting, she faced sustained questioning over the government’s confidence in TVNZ management, after the state-

owned broadcaster was ordered to pay \$5.2 million to a former newsreader (John Hawkesby) it had lured away from its rival, only to dismiss him soon afterwards when ratings fell. Hobbs stumbled when she confused the chief executive with the head of the TVNZ board, and the Opposition quickly seized on this mistake, identifying Hobbs as “the weakest link” in a seemingly impenetrable government. According to political reporter Elinore Wellwood (2000), “Within minutes of her first question time, she was labelled as being too ready to speak without thinking” (p.21). The broadcasting portfolio continued to be controversial, Hobbs was heavily scrutinised, and small and otherwise inconsequential lapses were seized upon by the Opposition and the media. Capitalising on the perception she made frequent mistakes, and reflecting her broadcasting portfolio, the Opposition nicknamed her “Booboo, the fifth Teletubby” (Bain, 2000, p.2), after the children’s television show. The low point of media coverage for Hobbs came when Prime Minister Helen Clark, apparently surprised by Hobbs’ press conference comment that a Royal Commission of Inquiry into Genetic Engineering would be “more intelligent” than a select committee, told the media (before telling her) that Hobbs needed a minder.

Hobbs’ ascent to Cabinet Minister resulted in a major shift in her relationship with the news media. During the June 2000 interview, Hobbs described herself as “utterly defensive, I can’t describe to you how defensive I am”. Her defensiveness in the face of the media was a reaction she returned to over and over again. She perceived that the media had “turned” on her, observing that characteristics that had never before been an issue - particularly her openness, extravagant language and tendency to think aloud - were suddenly construed negatively. Consequently, she stopped “giving profile”, and started avoiding particular people in the media, especially women:

Mostly I avoid any profiles, any talking about feelings. I’ve got extremely short and focused on the issue and giving factual replies, stopped thinking aloud anywhere near the media...it’s quite extraordinary how defensive I’ve become.

When she did agree to take part in a profile piece with the Evening Post this was because of her status as an electorate MP in the region, and her sense that she owed it to the people she represented.

Hobbs identified the shift in media content happening “as soon as I fudged it in the House, and that attack began”. She considered resigning

because “I thought that I was a damage to the Government in the sense that I was a distraction”. Hobbs was “completely thrown” by some of the comments made by women in the media, and recalled an article quoting a woman journalist as saying she looked like a sack of potatoes. She was hurt by the attacks on her appearance, which she admitted really got to her, and made her much more conscious of what she was wearing. “But I’ve got through it...one of the things that goes a little bit there is being older, and thinking ‘I know I’m OK’”. And through this period, she had great support from people in her electorate:

We had a lovely period of time when people were just coming in the doors, saying...they were furious. Now, there’s an interesting thing that happened – the women were furious at the attacks. I got flowers and letters...it was lovely. But they saw it as an attack on a woman and an attack on things that they valued – they value the fact that...I’m not polished, that I am ordinary...and that I’m open. I mean, a couple of times I’d say “yes, I have made a mistake, I’m sorry” – they thought that was a breath of fresh air in politics.

She took to heart a comment made by a friend and confidant who told her:

One of the things that’s different is that people expect their ministers to be self assured, give calm, non-flapping answers, and sometimes when you are searching for the word or using your extravagant language, it’s not what the public expects of a person in a position of responsibility.

Hobbs also differentiated between the coverage she got in the electorate (about 10% of her total coverage), which she said was not about her but about issues; about what she was saying or doing, rather than profile. “That confirms to me that that media blitz was really about picking a weakness in the government, at a time when there was very little policy out”.

Hobbs regarded her workload as horrendous and said “I do have a problem with staffing and appropriate people and things like that, and it just got really lonely”. She admitted being “bloody tired”, and at the time of the interview looked quite exhausted. Hobbs was also apprehensive about some issues building in her portfolios which she anticipated having

to face that evening, and the prospect of being tired and having to face the media on some very tough issues was of concern to her: “I’m so tired that I could easily make a mistake and then it’s all on again, and I can’t...” (trails off).

She agreed there is a “huge” confidence element in dealing with the media, and believed journalists smell weakness. Hobbs was unsure she would ever beat the label of “gaffe prone” applied to her, although she recounted how her press secretary challenged a media organisation to line up the gaffes, to count them, and recognise that there were only two. And Hobbs herself noted other politicians got things wrong in the House without having that label applied to them.

The personal cost of constant media pressure meant that after this time no reporters got through to her directly, on the advice of her press secretary. She told how this was a lesson she eventually learned the hard way on the morning Prime Minister Clark’s comment that Hobbs needed a minder was the lead story in the Dominion:

I was in bed, it was about half past six, quarter to seven in the morning and the phone went – it was Ruth Berry, Evening Post – and I was half awake and she said, “Have you seen the Dominion?” I said “no”, and then she read me the headline and I just, I was struggling not to burst into tears and keep that tremor out of my voice, and again, openly, quite honestly, said “Maybe I am, could be considered the class clown”. Headlines.

Hobbs’ press secretary told her not to answer the telephone in future, to which her response was:

Well, it’s extremely hard. You don’t know, it’s coming on your home phone, in the morning, at that stage it could be my daughter, a family member bloody dying, all those sorts of things – you just reach for the phone.

Something that particularly troubled her was the effect the media coverage had on her teenage daughter, who had begun to hate the media because their portrayal was not consistent with the person she knew her

mother to be. The advice Hobbs would offer to someone in a similar situation was to not talk to the media:

Certainly don't be open with them about feelings or never talk about yourself to them.

Only ever stay on policy... I used to just sort of talk aloud about the thought processes in my head or how I reached decisions. Don't do it now, only talk about the decision... Now for some people, they don't have to be told that because they are like that anyway.

Finally, Hobbs was unsure about any gender dimension to the coverage. She did feel her openness had a gender aspect to it (perhaps a more feminine trait), yet contrasted herself to leader Helen Clark who she felt dealt well with the media. Hobbs perceived that Clark never gets personal, is straight and clear with her message, and very focused. However, it should be noted that Clark has not always enjoyed a positive relationship with the news media, and the difficulties she faced early on in her career have been well documented (e.g. McGregor, 1996).

Discussion

Marian Hobbs: Minister for the Environment, Biosecurity, Broadcasting, Radio NZ, TVNZ, NZ On Air, Associate Communications. Convent girl, commune founder, communist... (Edwards, 1999, p. 1, describing Hobbs following her Cabinet appointment in December 1999)

In her 1999 Wellington Central race, Hobbs ran a community style campaign with little in the way of formal media strategy. Her reported contacts with the media peaked in the week of Bunkle's withdrawal from the contest, as did media coverage of Wellington Central throughout the nation's daily newspapers. Hobbs perceived she became more proactive in her dealings with reporters as the campaign developed, which coincided with more positive feelings towards the media (by the third interview, she felt that coverage had warmed towards her). She believed her electorate coverage improved after the first week, which likely reflected Bunkle's withdrawal and resulting positive poll results, showing Hobbs and Prebble were closely placed.

Hobbs' decision to base her electorate campaign on community networks and contacts was partially due to her understanding that Prebble's high profile made him more newsworthy and would give him the

upper hand in a media-based campaign. However, she also admitted she was neither adept at nor comfortable with promoting herself publicly. While relying on interpersonal contacts and networks is not an inherently “feminine” style of campaigning (Hobbs herself noted that United Future leader Peter Dunne employs this approach in his electorate), the reasons for choosing such an approach include modesty and a lack of confidence, both of which have been linked to women’s under-representation in the media and politics (e.g. Hughes, 2003; Nwankwo, 2001).

Hobbs’ approach to the media - during and after the 1999 campaign - is consistent with anecdotal evidence suggesting women politicians tend to lack confidence in their dealings with reporters. Self-effacement is often perceived as a feminine virtue in Western society, and the impact of gendered socialisation on women politicians’ behaviour must be considered. At the 1989 symposium of the International Parliamentary Union, most participants agreed that “a major barrier to women’s equal participation in political life was the lack of self confidence among women” (Kelber, 1994, p.48). Female political candidates in the US reported a nearly universal fear of reporters (Witt, Paget & Matthews, 1994) and although Jane Danowitz of the Women’s Campaign Fund has grown less sympathetic to this trend, it is something that comes up whenever they run training sessions:

“My suspicion is...that women don’t humour the press enough...I think women still need a lot of work learning to deal with the press....Women are fearful of reporters...and my sense is that discomfort is like being around a horse and being scared and the horse senses it. The press senses it. I think that’s where it breaks down...There are a lot of women like this” – she grimaces in mock horror – “uptight, not comfortable with giving out information.” (quoted in Witt et al., p.202)

Inexperienced candidates may also have a tendency to be too honest and emotional in their dealings with the media, and demonstrate a degree of naivety in believing they do not need a media strategy. In the long

term, and with the benefit of hindsight, Hobbs' decision to use a "community style" in the electorate campaign might have worked to her disadvantage, simply because it did little to prepare her for the demands of the media once she became a Cabinet Minister. For Hobbs, lack of confidence and anxiety quickly turned into defensiveness after her negative experiences as a minister, which at least partially stemmed from a lack of experience, training and support. An Evening Post profile of Hobbs in May 2000 quoted Lynn Middleton, her campaign manager, who conceded that while some of Hobbs' comments were not especially wise, "I'm sure she'll learn. Too many women do put themselves down, they don't assume a false confidence. Good on her for being herself" (quoted in Berry, 2000, p.11). However, Hobbs did pay a personal and professional price for her media inexperience, and in the contemporary political age, it was perhaps misguided to believe that "being herself" was sufficient when it came to dealing with the news media. As Motion and Leitch (2000) note:

Politicians who lack "media savvy" and who operate without public relations guidance are amateurs in a media world populated by highly trained professionals. Not only are they disadvantaged in relation to other politicians, they are also disadvantaged in relation to the media themselves. (p.79)

Hobbs herself acknowledged that her natural openness, arguably a more female characteristic, became a liability when dealing with the media, although the public was supportive of her uncontrived approach. For example, when caught at a weak moment, she agreed with a reporter that she was perhaps something of a "class clown", and this personal concession became a news headline.

It has been suggested that Hobbs' experiences post-election are related to the contemporary trend towards "dumbing down" in the media, accompanied by the rise of "Ministerial clones, coached by consultants to give repetitive answers regardless of the question...or schooled to shelter behind a stage-managed persona" (Wheeler, 2000, p.36). In a media column, former Sunday Star Times editor Jenny Wheeler (2000) summarises Hobbs' reputation as a smart and politically skillful politician whose "originality, ebullience and

wise-cracking made her a House stand-out” (p.36), and argues that her media downfall reflected the contemporary reality that politicians “survive less by policy than puffery” (p.36). Wheeler (2000) also notes that letters written to newspapers around this time suggested the public was more tolerant and welcoming of Hobbs’ approach, and regarded the negative coverage she received as indicative of a self-important and cynical news media. Hobbs too spoke of the public feedback she received commending her fresh and uncontrived style. Future research should therefore consider how media training is best delivered in a changing political environment, where public skepticism about politicians and politics appears to be on the increase. There is a growing body of evidence that political reporting is turning the public off politics and contributing to an increase in voter cynicism (e.g. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1994).

The challenge, then, is to create a professional persona that fits well with the politician’s personality and is not too scripted. Hobbs’ initial response to the negative media coverage she received after becoming a Cabinet Minister was to adopt a “strictly business” approach. However, it appears that this hard line has softened slightly as she regains her confidence and allows aspects of her personality to again show through. It is pertinent to recall that Prime Minister Helen Clark also experienced difficulties with the media during her rise to power, and her current successful media strategies are the result of extensive training and experience. Learning how best to “manage” the media is part of every politician’s apprenticeship, which is why recent research showing “a revolving door of female representation” (Nicholl, 2000, p.12) is cause for concern. Nicholl’s (2000) research, which shows that women are staying in politics for a shorter amount of time and citing media intrusion as one reason for leaving, demonstrates the need for on-going support as well as media advice and training. Further, politicians need to adapt to changing expectations of the public and the media. Hobbs’ experiences suggest that a low-key, community focused approach may work well in an electorate campaign, but is less suitable for the media demands that accompany a shift to Cabinet responsibilities.

Clearly, women politicians’ ability to effectively promote themselves and their political success is central to women’s full participation in public life. For the majority of female politicians, media training and on-going support will be vital if this is to be achieved. This case study, by documenting one woman’s transition from candidate to Cabinet Minister, suggests such turning points require careful management, and highlights the need for politicians to develop professional, political personas that are adaptable to changing circumstances. Finally, the case study approach itself, by documenting individual’s characteristics and experiences, makes an important contribution to our understanding of contemporary mediated politics.

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