

# Madden media plan shows the inner workings of spin

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ON FRIDAY afternoon, the ABC did Victorians a favour and posted the now infamous Justin Madden media plan on its website. Reading it is like pulling back a curtain and peering into the heart of the Brumby government spin machine.

The document - accidentally emailed to the ABC by Madden's media adviser, Peta Duke - was controversial because it floated the idea of a sham public consultation over the redevelopment of the Windsor Hotel. But it is more than a few snippets of strategy.

The government yesterday repeated that the plan was an "internal speculative working document" and refused to answer further questions. But, as the opposition pointed out, there is little that is speculative about the eight pages. The plan is actually considered, detailed, strategic and well-informed. Duke, who was blamed for coming up with the strategy to scuttle the Windsor development and has now been moved from the media unit, was actually very good at her job.

These media plans are not unusual in the government's media unit, which is run out of the Premier's office. Duke was doing what she normally does and sent her work plan to her bosses George Svigos and Sarah Dolan and the Premier's media adviser, Fiona Macrae. What is unusual is the public being able to read it.

So what does it tell us about the Brumby government? First, the level of media engagement is extensive. This is not unfamiliar territory for journalists, but among the Brumby government media tools are "drops", or exclusive policy announcements (in this case about sea level rise and planned for *The Age*). There are "get to know you" chats with local media. There is also media training booked for the Planning Minister, even though he has been in Parliament for a decade.

There also is a list of "kite flyers". This is when politicians test policies by "dropping" an idea to a media outlet and watching the reaction. This list included world heritage listing of the MCG, and banning car parks in new inner-city apartment buildings and instead providing free bikes and racks.

Perhaps of more concern is a line under the heading "issues" that says that documents tabled on February 16 "will need cover as (sic) allegations against Minister's actions". It is unclear what Duke means by "cover". Sometimes governments try to "cover" bad news by distracting the media with bigger announcements. The government refused to answer questions on this yesterday.

The media plan also reveals that no corner of government escapes a media adviser. The document goes through the minister's diary, current legislation, a list of "proactive" planned media events, stories that may come from government data and statistics, and a long list of "issues" - from bushfire bunkers that are not fully tested yet, to unpopular developments that are on the horizon. Duke also covered the progress of freedom-of-information requests from members of the opposition and media.

Far from being speculative, the document lists the strategy for many new developments, including a large social housing development at Coburg (which residents only recently found out about and it appears has already been approved), a car parking review, and a whole suite of actions on the "respect agenda". It also reveals that the government will, eight years late, honour an election commitment to release the River Valley Vision Guidelines designed to protect the Maribyrnong and Yarra valleys from inappropriate development.

Duke makes the observation that people in Mildura on the wrong end of a planning decision will "crack it". She also writes about a housing development in Geelong and notes that SBS's *Insight* program attended a public meeting "that went feral" about the proposal.

At various points in the plan, notes are made about what the opposition has said and opportunities

highlighted for criticism. Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu is identified as attending a Frankston project launch. "Ted will be at event. Minister will need strong attack lines on opposition," writes Duke.

With this amount of detail in just one media plan, the government must be worried about the upper house inquiry's request for all media plans dating back to December 2006. If they are handed over, the media plans are likely to be a bonanza of information and probably damaging.

This week, the Windsor scandal will result in Justin Madden facing his second vote of no confidence in less than a year. It is likely to come down to the vote of upper house Democratic Labor Party member Peter Kavanagh. He told *The Sunday Age* yesterday that while he was prepared to listen to Madden's side of the story, he was not impressed. Of the plans to run a sham public consultation and then scuttle the Windsor redevelopment, Kavanagh said: "I think it's kind of shocking, but not surprising."

He did not buy the government's argument that Duke was acting in isolation. "You don't propose tricky schemes to dupe the public if you don't think your boss might be amenable to something like that," he said.

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