

# The battle of the mailbox

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## Election '93: Battle of the mailbox

By STEPHEN MILLS

STRATEGISTS from both major political parties believe the outcome of the next federal election will be determined in part by the contest between "Feedback" and "Polfile".

"Feedback" is the sophisticated new direct mail system that the Liberal Party has developed to counteract Labor's extensive and effective direct mail network, "Polfile".

Direct mail — personalised letters and brochures sent to selected voters in key electorates — is doing to Australian voters' letter boxes what television advertising has done to their living rooms: transform them into political battlefields.

The national director of the Liberal Party, Mr Andrew Robb, believes that with "Feedback", the Liberals have closed the gap with Labor in this expensive but apparently effective branch of campaign technology.

"Our system is as good as any in the world," Mr Robb said in a recent interview. "It is second to none."

Labor has also recently refined and upgraded "Polfile", and is about to embark on the third phase of a direct mail campaign which began more than two years ago.

"Feedback" — the name deliberately echoes the Liberal Party's policy document Fightback — has been devel-

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oped by the Liberals over the past 18 months, in part through observing similar systems in the United States and elsewhere.

Mr Robb believes it is a system of power, speed and simplicity that allows Liberal candidates to communicate quickly and accurately with voters.

Both "Feedback" and "Polfile" rely on a large computerised data bank of names, addresses and other demographic information, combined with software that can print personalised letters and envelopes.

The idea is that a candidate wishing to say something about aged pensions, for example, can target a letter to elderly people; a polluted creek or noisy road can be made a campaign issue by sending letters to people who live nearby.

All Liberal MPs and senators have access to "Feedback", just as most Labor MPs and candidates have a "Polfile" terminal in their offices.

Both Mr Robb and Labor's assistant-national secretary, Mr Gary Gray, who oversees "Polfile", were reluctant to describe just what their systems are capable of — or how much they will be spending on direct mail for the 1993 campaign.

But it is clear that direct mail is increasingly sophisticated and will be a significant cost item to both parties.

"Polfile", which Labor has gradually built up since 1986, is regarded as having made an important contribution to Labor's successful marginal seats campaigning, including at the federal elections in 1987 and 1990.

Both "Feedback" and "Polfile" receive monthly voter updates from the Australian Electoral Commission. Census data is also purchased, allowing parties to fine tune their messages.

Labor's direct mail campaign started more than two years ago — with a strong emphasis on local issues, in a bid to give its candidates local credibility and to distance them from the political problems of Canberra.

Mr Gray, who quotes the adage that "all politics is local politics" believes the information kits help get Labor candidates into the community.

"Community campaigning is central to our political recovery for the '93 campaign," he said to colleagues in a circular last year.

"It is at the core of the strategy to rebuild community confidence in politicians.

"Directing efforts towards rebuilding our position in the community should come before we mount massive local attacks on the coalition's policy."

This first phase focused on providing community information in a non-partisan way, with candidates preparing and distributing kits about

fire safety, energy efficiency, food additives and the like.

Two Western Australian Labor MPs, Ron Edwards and George Gear — both of whom hold marginal seats — have been particularly busy in such campaigning. Mr Gear has issued a very popular kit on home security and Mr Edwards has produced one on avoiding skin cancers.

Direct mail has also been an important feature of Labor's campaigns in the Sydney electorates affected by airport noise.

More locally still, one Labor candidate in an urban electorate wrote to voters living near a particularly noisy local hotel, inviting them to a residents' meeting he had arranged with the

hotel manager where the problem could be discussed amicably over coffee.

"It was a simple and constructive way of addressing a local problem," one Labor source said.

Labor's second phase of direct mail sought to highlight the contrasts between coalition and government policies, with a third phase, about to begin, dealing with intensive "persuasion pieces" about the campaign issues.

The Liberals have also fine-tuned their campaigning to the local level, with candidates urged to highlight the local implications of national issues such as unemployment, hospital queues, and the difficulty of gaining entry to university.