
Reflections on Australian Political Rhetoric

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Keynote Address

Australian Political Rhetoric: Patterns and Practices" Conference

Australian National University

10 December 2014

Many issues come to mind when reflecting on political rhetoric - speech making, agenda setting, narrative building and the arts of identification and persuasion. In relation to the latter Kenneth Burke put it this way: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, IDENTIFYING your ways with his". What about "her" we may ask? Hasn't Burke already lost a battle if not the war when it comes to identification as persuasion? Indeed he notes that "wherever there is persuasion there is rhetoric. And wherever there is meaning there is persuasion". Through it we may seek to unify or divide, to capture or liberate, to incite or to discourage. It might target our beliefs, our knowledge or our emotional core, even our prejudices on the one hand or our most lofty aspirations on the other. It is as the editors of *Studies in Australian Political Rhetoric* put it "at the core of the politician's vocation".

It's important to note that it isn't just an unattached force but one factor amongst others in the battle for influence and power. Yes the message matters as does the ways and means of its presentation, but so too does the status of the person delivering it and the context in which it is being delivered. Trust is an issue that can relate to party as well as individual politician and one that can confound that which appears straightforward. So is credibility and, more importantly again, the relevance of the message itself to those being addressed. In saying this I'm reminded of Donald Horne's observation that The Lucky Country project led him to a more favourable view of "ordinary Australians" than he thought he would and a more "scathing assessment" of their leaders than he had expected. How often in fact do we find leaders using in-house logic and language that alienates rather than engages those to whom it is directed? Take for example the unholy alliance of the major parties in Canberra on the question of a Corruption Commission. It's for their mutual convenience that they resist such an initiative and electors know it!

Bringing these wider considerations to bear is important but all too often ignored when commentators seek to explain political weakness with reference to the lack of a narrative or story line. Sometimes it's just a case of a bad message perhaps relevant and supported by some but opposed by many more. See, for example, Troy Bramston's article, "the PM needs to get his story straight", in the Weekend Australian on Saturday. "The need for a clear, coherent and convincing political narrative to animate the government's purpose could not be more urgent", he says at the start of his column but then goes on to say later that "it is not too late" for the government "to redefine" its purpose and "rethink" its policies as well". Apparently, then, it's not a case of clarity after all but rather a case of relevance and acceptability; what Burke called the meaning of it all.

Rhetoric and styles of governing

How then do we best use the study of rhetoric in the study of politics? In my talk today I will look at different ways we may classify and understand Australian political rhetoric. Firstly, I'll see how we might or might not relate rhetoric to two styles of democratic leadership, one defined by the light on the hill and the other by the next initiative -and the one after that. Secondly, I will look at the social and cultural foundations of rhetoric as I experienced them in two areas of government and then in general terms by pointing to different narratives that have been developed about the nation, its past, present and future.

I've always used a simple model of the political enterprise that starts with vision, moves to strategy and finishes with tactics. Vision is the overarching set of ideas that lie behind practice, strategy the mix of politics and policy seen as necessary to defend and advance the vision and tactics the day-to-day management of opportunities and challenges. Rhetoric is needed for all three and can be judged accordingly- the powerful ideological statement calling for support and commitment, the sophisticated speech outlining how the policies proposed are relevant and feasible and the daily outpouring of words that defend and attack and, on occasion re-define strategy in the face of unforeseen events or problems in implementation. What's needed within such a frame is consistency, repetition and where refinement or reworking is required a good explanation of why it is needed.

However, there are democratic politicians, probably most, who do not see the world within such strategic parameters. They may engage rhetoric not as part of a wider narrative but as a tool to use - and not necessarily consistently - when faced with the day-to-day challenges of politics. This is what we might call the "events management" style of leadership in which marketing is not just important but at the heart of the enterprise itself. One day the focus will be on the management of a budget emergency, another on protecting citizens in the suburbs and another again on dealing with a scandal within government or society.

Libertarian, collectivist or communitarian - it all depends on time and circumstance but whichever is appropriate it gets the full treatment and "over persuasion", as the Greeks called it, is a constant temptation. The fact that when the bits and pieces are added up and don't display a consistent story it's not seen as a problem but rather as a virtue, particularly if it leads to re-election.

What's interesting here is that a form of political rhetoric is needed for both of these approaches to governing. The strategists talk a lot about. "the light on the hill" and put a strong focus on feasible policies to that end. They make a case for the politics of purpose and the medium and long terms as well as the present. Their claims are larger whatever the value or particular mix of values that defines them. The events managers on the other hand balk at big thinking and make a virtue of what they see as their pragmatism. It is the penny in the pocket rather than the pie in the sky which they define as their objective. Grand objectives like renewing democracy or re-shaping society - and the rhetoric that goes with it are seen as words that signify much but which can deliver little that is good.

It would be nice to be able to conclude that the difference between the two is over the role of reasoned argument as opposed to unbridled populism as a means of persuasion. The truth is messier as the strategists may be fundamentalists pursuing a single idea at the expense of others and in denial concerning consequences. So might it be the case that the opportunism of the events managers pushes them into territory where they are forced to raise the bar, for example when a wicked problem emerges as central to the political debate. What we call spin can be harnessed on behalf of an overarching narrative just as much as it can on behalf of a ministerial reshuffle.

This all being said I can still see a better fit between rhetoric and reality within a strategic framework. It's rhetoric with the ballast provided by a program and underpinned by a purpose. It doesn't guarantee consistency but it does call for it- and make a point for judgment. Events managers, on the other hand, must of necessity make a virtue of twists and turns, not an easy task in a system that values integrity.

Rhetoric for a Labor Premier

With these thoughts in mind let me turn to my own time in politics and make some observations about what worked and what didn't work for me when in power. As Joust and Scheurermann noted in their paper *Design as Rhetoric* "production of effectiveness is the central driving force behind rhetorical communication". This means that "the success of communication can be at least partially verified, i.e. when public reaction is assessed". With this as a backdrop I'll look at two issues - the position of the state within the federation and the sustainability agenda and its triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental objectives.

In my rhetoric there was always the reference, sometimes implied, and sometimes implicit, to the people and state of Western Australia with their own history and their own institutions, part of the nation but restless in its embrace. What I would call "pride in state" was very helpful when defending my policy to stop logging all old growth forests (not consistent with national forest policy at the time) and walking out on John Howard's National Water Agreement at a COAG meeting to follow a course of our own making. Our states (and territories) are an important point of reference for citizens and political rhetoric can be built around them. It's a field worth ploughing but not as an end-in-itself.

Second, there was my advocacy of "sustainability" as a governing principle for the work of government. In my mind's eye it meant taking us beyond economics to embrace community on the one hand and the environment on the other - and doing all of that with an eye to the future as well as the past and present. I'm pretty sure the word itself didn't sink in but I do believe that the ideas it endorsed in relation to budget management, democratic practice, science policy, social equity, public transport and conservation planning were well received. There is receptivity here but the tricky bit remains "the economy". Obviously it's no longer on its own and at the top within a triple bottom-line framework but competitiveness, investment and job creation all remain as part of the mix. In today's politics those objectives are often linked to economic rationalism and limited rather than enabling styles of government, surely a problem for a social democrat. Let's start with the workplace itself.

For those to the left appeals to class solidarity work, but only if one's opponents advocate radical de-regulation of the labour market - a fair go for all yes, but a closed shop no. More important is the weapon of a social and environmental wage as a right for all and funded by a fairer allocation

of the tax burden. Somewhere in the middle there is a policy mix that achieves an acceptable balance between flexibility and fairness but finding it without speaking with a forked tongue remains the central rhetorical conundrum for the nation's union-based Labor Party. Julia Gillard in particular found this to be a challenge and in a speech to the Australian Workers' Union whilst Prime Minister expressed her distaste for reform rhetoric by saying Labor isn't a progressive, a moderate or a socialist democratic (I think she meant social democratic) but rather a "Labor" Party because that name best describes "what we believe in" and "who we are".

The battle for the nation

What all this tells us is that there is a relationship - albeit a complex one - between political rhetoric and the community within which it is expressed. As try as they might politicians cannot shape reality as if writing on a blank sheet of paper, but nor is it an unalterable given. Sometimes a party narrative backed up by key words and specific policies is just too much for any but a minority to digest, understand and support. Hewson in 1993 and Keating in 1996 are often cited as examples. Sometimes, on the other hand, it works a treat - Hawke's "national consensus" and Howard's "aspirational nationalism" being case studies.

Clearly too it's not just the words and what they represent but the persistence and effectiveness of the campaigning associated with them.

For most of the time, most of the people are not focused on politics - it is background noise as they go about their daily lives at home and work and in the community, where there's plenty to keep them busy! Politics is left to the politicians, the activists, the lobbyists and the media. However, this doesn't mean they aren't interested. They differ in place of birth and residence, background, class, religion etc. and have their likes and dislikes, notions of what is right and wrong, and views about what works and doesn't work. To quote Donald Horne again: "Everyone has faiths of some kind - without them we can't think or act".

Across the electorate there are both shared and contested understandings of the nation, its past, present and future; just as there is in the states and indeed local communities generally. What this means is that when electors are activated they don't come to the process simply with a blank sheet and a cost/benefit calculator; they come with a set of values and seek a "fit" between these values and what is being offered by the parties and candidates. This is why social movements are so important for political parties. They create momentum in society and build alliances around shared ideas. Quite often such ideas gain majority support before political leaders of a similar view realise it and feel confident enough to go on the front foot in advocating them. I would put same-sex marriage into that category today.

In a sense there are always a range of competing narratives swirling around the political process, each with their advocates and their foot soldiers. Some are more and some are less comprehensive. These narratives create space for particular words and each has its own logic and language. It follows that one way to study rhetoric is to identify and describe these narratives and see how politicians put them to work individually or, in the case of the major parties, as a package.

First there is "Old Australia", best represented by Bob Katter - committed to protectionism, opposed to privatisation and de-regulation, concerned about the future of rural and regional

Australia, and tough on asylum seekers. They want to develop the nation or what used to be called "filling up the open spaces". They want a radical return to things as they once were.

Second there is "Globalised Australia", best represented by the big-end of town and their free market intellectuals. They want an Australia that emphasizes individual responsibility, is open to the world economy and supports freedom in production, distribution and exchange. Efficiency is their key word and "world's best practice" their ambition.

Third there is "Cosmopolitan Australia", well represented in the contemporary scene by Paul Keating. The cosmopolitans are also globalists and free-traders but are anxious to see to it that "commercial values" aren't allowed to define our culture and our cities. While economic rationalism is important, it isn't everything! They like to talk of diversity and the creativity it brings.

Fourth there is "Fair Australia" associated with the labour movement and its allies. They believe in political, social and economic rights, multiculturalism and more equality in the distribution of wealth and income. They don't like the compromises that have been made to our welfare state and public services and in this sense are traditionalists.

Fifth there is "Green Australia", represented mainly but not only by the party with that name. They too believe in equality, but want it backed up by a low-carbon economy, nature conservation, reduced defence spending and tougher controls over economic development generally. They are radical opponents of "business as usual" and express fears for the future given current trends.

Sixth there is "Strong Australia" whose advocates also see an uncertain and changing world but say this is no time to de-prioritise defence of our boundaries, externally and as represented by our way of life. They want to see these borders protected, our armed services strengthened and our alliances bolstered.

Finally there is "Democratic Australia" less obvious as a current but on the move in the face of revelations of corruption and a feeling that the system is no longer truly representative of the people. It takes shape as political activity from below in favour of independents but urges more by way of consultation, engagement and occasionally delegated power.

Whether you are a populist or advocate of deliberative democracy reference to "the people" is a powerful support never to be underestimated.

What we see represented here are a range of values - community, freedom, pluralism, fairness, sustainability, security and democracy - all of which can be used in the act of identification and persuasion. Fundamental beliefs, knowledge to justify them and emotions to seal the deal at a personal level can be seen in each, as can both conservative and radical tendencies. What we see are potential sources of rhetoric for those seeking influence or power. Some are a reflection of universal values but the evidence would seem to indicate that the rhetoric of universality works best when linked to Australian history and its traditions like a "fair go"; the strategy and rhetoric ("Every Australian Counts") adopted by proponents of the National Disability Scheme and launched on Australia Day being a good case study.

For what it's worth my view is that the democratic deficit in our society today has the greatest potential as a source of policy and rhetoric. The Coalition's assault on "entitlement" has fallen foul of the fair go tradition but the ALP's reluctance to go beyond "laborism" and embrace democratic renewal both internally and as public policy is thwarting its claim to be the party of the people. The result of all of this is close to inevitable - more room for single-issue populism and more opportunity for independents. Their rhetoric is outgunning the majors.