Studying Australian political rhetoric

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This book arose from a conference at the School of Politics and International Relations at The Australian National University, held in May 2013, and supported by an Australian Research Council grant awarded to the editors to study Australian political rhetoric. The conference was conceived with one overarching aim in view: to demonstrate the centrality of rhetoric to democratic politics. If rhetoric is broadly conceived as persuasive language use, then it is a daily activity for politicians, who must constantly communicate, inform, persuade, attack and defend, cajole, scare, conceal, while performing many other actions besides. Language use represents the core of the politician’s vocation, and following its rhythms and consequences is the constant task of journalists and commentators. Yet Australian political scientists give it little attention. Reviewing the papers in this collection makes clear how successfully the conference’s aim was realised.

The chapters in Part I are concerned with the relationship between political speech and political behaviour. Stephen Mills shows that Kevin Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generations (2008), given while he was prime minister, was a case of national leadership. Rudd was thus performing two actions at the same time — apologising and leading — in an international context in which the act of apologising is ‘a new instrument of public leadership’. As the holder of the pre-eminent representative office, the prime minister can claim to speak on behalf of a political community and, in doing so, suprernove on its public memory with greater force than other public officers because, as Mills notes, ‘attempted apologies by public officials below prime ministerial rank have tended to fail’. Mills’s gambit is that interventions into national memory can have ‘transformative’ power because they shape imagined pasts and futures. John Howard’s less committal prime ministerial expression of ‘deep sorrow’ and his Motion of Reconciliation (1999) might, therefore, be seen not as a stubborn refusal to apologise, but as a more cautious assessment of the intervention into public memory required of the prime minister.

Ryan Walter addresses the language–behaviour nexus through Quentin Skinner’s notion of ‘evaluative–descriptive’ terms. In this case, politicians attacked and defended a certain governmental action, normally referred to as fiscal policy. Walter argues that the terms ‘responsible economic management’ and ‘fiscal discipline’ were used to legitimate action, while a negative appraisive vocabulary was used to expose ‘irresponsible economic management’ or ‘fiscal recklessness’ in the same piece of fiscal policy. The criteria that define when
these terms can be used are weak, and this is part of their appeal, as Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello appreciated while in office. The Australian Labor Party’s recent fiscal misfortunes in relation to declining federal revenues were exacerbated by its leaders’ seemingly imperfect understanding of this rhetoric, as the claims to ‘responsible economic management’ were fused with a promise to deliver a surplus, and this summoned the divergent value of ‘trustworthiness’. Labor was consequently obliged to make cuts to spending to try to achieve a surplus and so align its behaviour with its rhetoric — a painful exercise that could have been avoided if the relatively demanding rhetoric of trustworthiness and promise-keeping had never been deployed and only the accommodating ‘responsible economic management’ had been used. Here, then, is a clear case where language use constrained action.

Jennifer Rayner examines the language used to justify two high-stakes decisions to change prime minister, from Bob Hawke to Paul Keating, and from Kevin Rudd to Julia Gillard. One transition was successful in the sense that the new leader was unencumbered by the need to explain and defend the leadership transition; by contrast, ‘the rhetoric of Gillard’s ascension gave the public multiple reasons to question her right to the role’. Perhaps Gillard’s greatest mistake was to describe herself as an unelected leader and link her legitimacy to the exercise by Australians of a ‘birthright’ to choose their prime minister. As Rayner describes, this course of legitimation was negative in character because it held Gillard’s legitimacy in abeyance until the next election, when that legitimacy was disastrously complicated by a minority government alliance with the Greens, which saw the prime minister reverse an election promise not to tax carbon. Worse, this populist justification was at odds with the actual constitutional and parliamentary workings of Australian democracy, and therefore turned Gillard away from a positive justification grounded in Australia’s political history.

The first of Barry Hindess’s chapters examines the language–behaviour relation from the opposite side, by underlining not how language constrains, but how it enables. The language of the ‘Little children are sacred’ report on sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities provided linguistic and intellectual resources for the Howard government to employ in legitimating its Northern Territory ‘Emergency Response’ intervention, a set of actions that are likely to have been at odds with the desired wishes of the report’s authors. The lesson, in other words, is that ‘political rhetoric may be either intended or unintended and that the latter may well be consequential’. Key here was the report’s use of an opposition between modern and traditional ways of living, which invokes a powerful set of assumptions regarding the need for change in those communities portrayed as traditional. When this modern/traditional distinction was combined with the
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report’s appeal for urgency, the call for consultation with Aboriginal groups was easy to ignore. Hindess’s chapter, therefore, offers a case study of unintended consequences in the realm of rhetoric.

Dennis Grube’s chapter returns to the theme of the constraining effects of political rhetoric by introducing the concept of path dependency. Politicians make ‘rhetorical choices’ and, in doing so, they may impose limits on ‘the range of rhetorical options open to them for the future’. Successful rhetoric will be repeated and lock a politician into a certain course unless they are prepared to face the risk of ‘looking inauthentic, inconsistent and untrustworthy’, yet political life is full of nuance and contingency that prompts changes in position. This trade-off was faced by prime ministers Rudd and Gillard and then Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott. Where Abbott modified his rhetoric on asylum seekers early and at low political cost, Rudd and Gillard paid high prices for their reversals on climate policy. Managing the trade-off between consistency and flexibility is a crucial skill for leaders, as illustrated by the fortunes of Rudd and Gillard. Once more, rhetoric, or language use, emerges as the key skill for politicians, at the heart of Australian political events.

The focus of Part II is those standards for political rhetoric that are ‘internal’ to politics, in the sense that they are historical, polemical, or institutional. The hope is that the essays of Part II point the way to an alternative, empirical approach to conceiving of standards of rhetoric, as against looking to sources ‘external’ to politics, especially philosophical reason, as found in Rawlsian and Habermasian formulations of ‘public reason’. For, if it is true that politicians use rhetoric everyday, then we need to know how their rhetoric is regulated, if at all, by everyday mechanisms.

Some of the standards of Australian political rhetoric are endogenous and some are imported. Mark Rolfe’s paper pierces the myth of a golden past when Australian political rhetoric was inspiring and informing by investigating the history of rhetorical standards and their deployment in political combat from the 1820s. The absence of a stable and objective standard for judging rhetoric has meant that ‘creative imaginings of past leaders and their rhetoric have been essential standards for judging current leaders and their language’. The United States has long been an exporter of rhetorical standards to Australia, especially the anxiety that rhetorical decorum (and its absence) might be symptomatic of a politician’s character. In this respect, the rise of the ‘plain speaking’ trope in Australian politics and its use by Robert Menzies and Howard was foreshadowed by developments in the United States.

Hindess’s second chapter studies ‘dog whistling’, a term of abuse used in recent Australian politics. It entails the accusation that a politician has sent a coded message — typically of unsavoury character — that will be correctly perceived
by only one part of the electorate. Leftist commentators in Australia have tended
to use the term to accuse Howard and Gillard of covertly expressing racist and
anti-immigration sentiments. From the perspective of political rhetoric, dog
whistling should be seen as ‘a sophisticated kind of rhetoric’, since an audience
can be segmented with the same piece of speech. What dog whistling in fact
designates is, therefore, simply the omnipresent practice in politics of coded
messaging, it is just the message that is under attack. Hindess colourfully
concludes that ‘the concept of dog-whistle politics is hardly worth the napkin
it was probably first scribbled on’. A different issue arises for the user of this
attack term, that ‘[h]owever one reads the charge of dog whistling, the implied
description of those who respond to its call is distinctly unflattering’, while
those who can perceive the coding behaviour ‘constitute an observant, morally
superior elite’. In Australia, at least, the accusation of dog whistling is normally
dog whistle itself.

The final chapter relating to standards of rhetoric is John Uhr’s account of recent
virulent debate over the role of the Speaker of the House of Representatives,
including contributions from the three Speakers who held office during the
Gillard minority government. The Speaker is one of the few offices prescribed in
the Australian constitution as a regulator of parliamentary proceedings according
to rules authorised by the House, but the exact role is underspecified, except on
the point that the Speaker’s deliberative voice is silenced. Uhr’s account offers
two conclusions. First, that ‘independence’ is the best candidate for an accepted
principle that should guide the Speaker in Australia, but this principle does
not ‘confer a substantial positive role to determine positive standards of orderly
conduct’, and the Speaker’s task is limited to disciplining disorderly conduct.
Second, and despite the bipartisan acceptance of independence as the relevant
principle to be invoked and denied in debates over the role of Speaker, the office
of Speaker is not immune from party interests. In other words, the Speaker
is the official regulator of democratic speech, but the nature of the Speaker’s
official duties is the subject of open-ended political contest.

This last point should be viewed with the earlier claim regarding the capacity
for language use to constrain and enable action, because what emerges is a view
of politics in which partisan contest is primarily linguistic in nature. This claim
is balanced by the import of the final group of papers, where attention turns to
the substantive content of political speech; political speech is not solely used
to legitimate behaviour and attack opponents, but it is also used to set out
normative visions, shape the behaviour of others, and produce policy. Mark
Hearn’s and Ian Tregenza’s analysis of Alfred Deakin’s post-Federation speeches,
which are normally associated with nation-building and the idea of an ‘Australian
settlement’, reveal that alongside Deakin’s concrete policies on immigration and
industrial policy sat a focus on citizenship. The nerve of Deakin’s rhetoric was
that Australian citizens would need to cultivate certain qualities if the nation-building enterprise was to succeed. Discipline, self-reliance, and patriotism took centrestage, and it was hoped that a citizenry that displayed these qualities would lend the fledging polity the unity needed for a safe future. The anxiety over national unity combined with Deakin’s awareness of international competition in commerce and arms, and impelled his burdensome prescriptions for institution-building.

The nation-building enterprise that marked Australia’s early history was perceived to have been attacked by ‘economic rationalism’, the topic of Geoffrey Stokes’s chapter. Yet one of Stokes’s findings is that this reproving use of the term worked alongside commendatory and categorical uses, and the phrase began life in the 1970s as praise for the Labor government of Gough Whitlam. As the intensity and volume of the debate over the role of economic reasoning in national life increased in the 1980s under the Hawke and Keating governments, the uses of the idea of economic rationalism came to diverge and, combined with the failure of John Hewson’s explicitly reform-based election campaign in 1993, the term’s prevalence in public life declined, even as the role of economic expertise gained acceptance. In other words, linguistic innovation and evanescence is an index to political–economic change.

Continuing the chronological development through Australia’s policy history, Melissa Lovell studies how tropes of neoliberal discourse have been used to justify interventionist governmental techniques in the Northern Territory. In this respect, her chapter fits with the theme of Part I. Yet her major concern is to show how neoliberal tropes, such as the capable citizen and the failures of the welfare state, were used to produce governmental knowledge of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were distinguished as a segment of the Australian population by being attributed with two qualities. First, forms of personal comportment that fell below the standard of the autonomous neoliberal citizen. Second, substandard social and economic outcomes that were partly a result of this first quality, but which also flowed from the policy failures of communal land tenure and community employment programs. This specification of a sub-population was a necessary precondition for the legal apparatus that was applied to this population as the target of intensive government known as the Northern Territory Intervention.

Perhaps the overriding lesson from Lovell’s chapter is that political speech is intimately involved in knowledge production and the work of governing. This point leads back to the original premise underlying the conference: language matters. It matters because using language is what politicians do, because it constrains, enables, and programs their governmental actions, even as those constraints can be mediated and shifted by further language use. The fact that political speech is not subject to stable, philosophical standards recalls John
Kane’s opening comments on the perennial tension between the aspirations that have always been held for rhetoric and the disappointments that it routinely engenders. This, too, must be an ingredient in the study of political rhetoric.