What’s at stake in Australian political rhetoric?

John Kane

Rhetoric — generally defined as the art of discourse — has been distrusted as deceptive or subversive ever since the Greek sophists made a living instructing how to make the weaker argument seem the stronger in the law courts, or how to use persuasion to win in politics. Still today, people commonly dismiss rhetoric as ‘mere rhetoric’ — an effusion of ineffectual words by slippery politicians, concealing more than it reveals.1

Yet rhetoric remains central to democratic politics, which necessarily depend more fundamentally on the power of persuasion than on the force of command. Persuasion relies crucially on explanation and argument — in Greek, the *logos*. But how are non-expert citizens to judge whether a political argument (which does not admit of mathematical demonstration) is sound or merely cleverly deceptive? Here Aristotle’s amendment of sophistical cynicism remains as salient today as when he issued it millennia ago. He argued that of equal importance to *logos* in rhetorical practice were judgements of character — *ethos* — both the listeners’ judgement of the character of the speaker and the speaker’s judgement of the character of the audience. In the former case an audience must judge whether the speaker is a competent and trustworthy source, and in the latter the speaker must understand what matters to, and therefore will move, a particular audience. This last consideration brings up another of Aristotle’s requirements of rhetoric — *pathos* — an appeal to the emotions. Even a sound argument from a reliable source is meaningless if no one cares about the issue at hand (Aristotle 2000, 1356a1–16; Bk II, Chs 2–11).

Aristotle’s analysis resonated through the ages as political leaders strove to find the words and style that could move people in presumptively virtuous directions.2 Ideal rhetoric was that capable of moving an audience by the evident wisdom of the argument and the indubitable character of the speaker. The hope of seeing this ideal realised endures, though hope is always shaded by the distrust that speech inevitably arouses in the political arena. The papers

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1 At the opposite extreme, rhetoric may be feared as all too effectual in arousing a democratic rabble to insurrection.
2 Ciceron took up the Aristotelian elements of rhetoric in his De Oratore (55 BCE), describing them as *probare*, *delectare*, *flectere* (to prove, to delight, to stir). This formulation is later taken up by Quintilian and becomes important in Augustine’s discussion of Christian eloquence (see Kennedy 1986: 100). For a modern reassessment, see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2003) and Garsten (2006).
in this collection afford material for contemplation of this perennial tension between ideal and actual in the Australian context, and allow us to address our leading question: what is at stake in Australian political rhetoric?

**Australian political rhetoric**

A general inquiry into Australian political rhetoric may be imagined to aim at one or both of two things: a) to apply a general understanding of the functioning of political rhetoric to particular Australian cases; or b) to discern what may be distinctively *Australian* in the rhetoric of our nation. Reflection on the papers collected in this volume suggests that these aims are so deeply intertwined in practice as to be scarcely separable. To be sure, Barry Hindess reports that the term ‘dog-whistle politics’ may (or may not) be of Australian coinage, but that marks an exception (if it is one). The profound interconnectedness across history of the Australian political system with the systems of other nations — Britain and the United States in particular, but also all other democracies — means there has been massive influence on Australian rhetoric from sources abroad, as well as a comparable set of challenges and problems that rhetorical practices must try to meet. Thus Mark Rolfe in this collection explores how political leaders in the developing Australian colonies and in the early Commonwealth looked consciously to the evolving rhetoric of US leaders to discern a style suited to their own burgeoning democracy. More recently, as Stephen Mills notes, Australian leaders have borrowed a new ‘rhetoric of apology’ for past official wrongs from examples set in Europe and elsewhere since the 1990s.

But for all the inherited commonalities and influences, Australian political history has followed such an idiosyncratic path that we should be surprised if Australian rhetoric had *not* acquired its own distinctive accents. Rolfe traces the general evolution of political rhetoric from a high-flown aristocratic style to a more ‘middling’ one that maintained some ideals of literary allusion, and then on to the more thoroughly demotic form of speech that is usual today. The example he uses of the last is that of John Howard (he might equally have mentioned Bob Hawke), fittingly I think, for few cultures have fulfilled the ideal of democratic rhetoric as thoroughly as the contemporary Australian. One has only to listen to a 1950s recording of Robert Menzies with his impeccably Anglo-Australian locution to measure how far the demotic evolution has advanced in this country. Howard was a master of Australian ordinariness, his flat accent declaring that there was no essential distance between leader and led, his low-key tone expressing the assurance that, whatever the issue, there was nothing to get in a flap about, nothing that he and his government couldn’t handle. Howard would never have claimed to be an orator, but he was a clear and effective speaker who spoke to, never down to, the people.
This political expression of our famously egalitarian ethos evolved within a unique political system, a version of British parliamentarism governed by unwritten conventions modified by an American-influenced written constitution. The latter established the Senate as a supposed ‘states’ house’ with almost coequal legislative powers as the lower House of Representatives. This system complicated parliamentary government after the introduction of proportional representation brought the Senate into serious political play by giving minor elements the balance of power. The resultant political arrangement is one that bears strong resemblances to British and American systems, but is identical to neither, a peculiarly Australian amalgam that carries within it inherent tensions. One of these results from the fact that the constitution enumerates the powers of ‘the Executive’ — which is to say of the Governor-General, the Queen’s representative as Head of the Commonwealth — while remaining silent (in accord with British conventions) on the real agents of political power, the prime minister and cabinet. The dismissal of a sitting prime minister in 1975 by the then Governor-General dramatically revealed that the monarch’s representative in the Australian system was not as safely ‘constitutionalised’ as was the monarch herself (a fact that may be the focus of renewed rhetorical attention if ever the subject of an Australian republic, and the presumed titular head of that republic, re-emerges for serious debate).

The principal forum for rhetorical contestation in the Australian polity remains, nevertheless, the lower house, where government is formed, the prime minister sits, and the opposition strives to call the government to account during question time. It is a curious fact, explicated in this collection by John Uhr, that the only constitutionally recognised role in this consequential assembly is that of Speaker of the House, and then only in a manner that leaves much room for interpretation and parliamentary determination. Uhr examines the controversial changeover of three Speakers under the Rudd–Gillard government and tries to determine what the rhetorical parliamentary exchanges on the issue tell us about the Speaker’s role. It emerges that, despite the title, the Speaker’s task is more one of listening than speaking, and listening in order to manage the chamber in a way that effectively preserves some modicum of order among the sparring parties. Uhr notes the case of Peter Slipper, a Speaker who, by general admission, provided fair and firm management but nevertheless proved unacceptable because of his out-of-chamber conduct and generally dubious character. Slipper, a former Liberal member of parliament, was appointed by Julia Gillard to deprive the opposition of a vital extra vote in a hung parliament, despite his facing criminal charges and being widely viewed as unfit for office by virtue of offensively sexist remarks. Slipper’s eventual departure, says Uhr, tells us about ‘the requirement for evidence of personal integrity in positions of public integrity’ and ‘that governments have accountability obligations when they appoint undeserving persons to high parliamentary office.’
This is a significant observation because the themes of integrity and trust and, by association, political legitimacy, echo repeatedly throughout this collection — unsurprisingly given that the central topic is political rhetoric. Distrust in leadership integrity is, as argued elsewhere (Kane and Patapan 2012), practically a defining feature of democracy, and Australians are certainly inclined toward a general cynicism regarding politics and politicians. But how deep is this distrust in the Australian political system, and how significant for its health?

Rhetoric, integrity and trust

Mark Hearn and Ian Tregenza provide a fascinating historical example of an Australian leader, Alfred Deakin, who was supremely conscious of the importance of instilling trust, and who sought to fulfil the classical rhetorical ideal. Deakin was generally recognised at home and abroad as Australia’s most gifted and fluent orator. He looked to classical and contemporary models to fashion speech capable not just of convincing people on critical policy matters, but also of contributing to nation-building by fostering virtues of discipline, self-reliance and readiness to defend the new Commonwealth. In explicating the persuasiveness of a speech, Deakin noted the essential connection between a speaker’s character and the words spoken, emphasising most especially the qualities of sincerity and deeply held conviction.

Australians would no doubt like to see this ideal upheld by the present generation of leaders, but seem hardly to expect it. Must it inevitably be so? The essays gathered here give us some clues to assessing this question.

It is instructive to note first that patently sincere speech has not been entirely absent from Australian politics, even over the last few turbulent years. Indeed it has been movingly witnessed in a sequence of official apologies by Australian prime ministers and ministers: to Aboriginal Stolen Generations, to people forced to migrate to Australia as children, to sexually abused members of the defence forces, and to individuals caught up in the practice of forced adoption. Though this rhetoric of apology may have been modelled on precedents set abroad, it has proved, as Mills argues, an effective instrument of public leadership for governments concerned, after decades of avoidance, to admit and allay old offences of Australian officialdom. The road to deploying such rhetoric has been long and contested, centrally at issue being questions of historical continuity and enduring responsibility. Howard expressed ‘sincere regrets’ and ‘deep sorrow’ over the treatment of Aboriginal children in the past, while denying that the present generation could be held collectively responsible for the public acts of previous generations — a view that sat in curious contradiction to his desire to see an affirmative (‘non-black armband’) account of Australian history.
taught in schools. We were entitled, it seemed, to take pride in the positive achievements of our forebears, in the sacrifices of our soldiers at Gallipoli and so on, but could not assume responsibility, through outright apology, for past wrongs in which we were not personally implicated. Kevin Rudd, in his apology to the Stolen Generations, asserted to the contrary that the necessary continuity was provided, not by individuals, but by the enduring institutions of the Commonwealth, most particularly the Parliament, which was the author of past policies and thus the locus of current responsibility for their amendment.

The rhetoric of apology is, however, the exception that proves the rule, a special form to be distinguished from the normal political rhetoric used, for example, to defend a policy, explain a budget or attack an opponent. Mills writes that it is rather a ‘constitutive’ form of performative speech act that ‘transforms the polity’ and allows it ‘to address and deal with … profound questions of national reconciliation and identity.’ The various issues that have been addressed are part of the mixed but distinctive Australian story, ones that could be effectively addressed only by a government authorised to speak on behalf of the whole Australian people. It is this ‘speaking for the nation’ that places the apologies in a higher, more sacred political realm than day-to-day politics, where the sincerity of speakers is usually much harder to judge and is in fact frequently questioned.

Distrust of leadership rhetoric is a theme that has played long and loud in recent Australian politics, and many essays in the present collection expressly address the period of the Rudd–Gillard Labor governments in order to explore the connection between rhetoric, trust and legitimacy. Jennifer Rayner, for example, tries to show how closely leadership legitimacy is tied to the rhetoric that leaders deploy to explain themselves; in Gillard’s case to explain her sudden assumption of prime ministerial office. Rayner’s method is to contrast Gillard’s rhetorical failure with the success of Paul Keating, a generation earlier, when he defeated Hawke without being regarded as an illegitimate usurper. At issue was not the (then) right of the Labor caucus to change the leadership, which was unquestioned in both cases. Keating, however, came to power after a prolonged struggle and as though ‘to the manor born’, while Gillard came suddenly, like an assassin in the night. Her earliest words as prime minister seemed, as Rayner argues, to confirm her own doubts about her legitimacy, describing herself as a reticent conscript to the role, refusing to move into the Lodge until she had an election in which she ‘fulsomely earned the trust of the Australian people to be prime minister’, and tying her right to leadership to promises to deliver on key policies better than Rudd had done. Rayner also contrasts the words of the defeated leaders: Hawke accepting (genuinely if reluctantly) the validity of Keating’s win; Rudd claiming that factional leaders (the notorious ‘faceless
men’) had overthrown a prime minister elected by ‘the people of Australia’, a theme that was ever after reflected in press commentary describing the event as a ‘coup’ or a ‘putsch’.

Rayner claims that this initial failure by Gillard to convincingly assert her legitimacy as prime minister was more important than, and in fact set the scene for, the furore over her broken promise not to introduce a carbon tax. Yet the latter shift of policy — again poorly defended by Gillard — gave reasonable cause for the unrelenting attacks by Tony Abbott’s opposition on Gillard’s honesty and trustworthiness. Further rhetorical missteps gave more ammunition to the opposition, particularly the promise made and oft-repeated by Treasurer Wayne Swan and Gillard herself to bring the budget into modest surplus in 2013. The latter case is carefully explored by Ryan Walter in this collection, again using an historical contrast, this time with the Howard–Costello administration and its failure to produce a surplus in 2002. Little damage was done to the credibility of Howard and Peter Costello because they had rhetorically framed the issue as one of aspiration (‘we don’t like budget deficits’) and of reasonable forecasting that was inevitably at the mercy of external economic conditions. Labor’s blunder was to frame the matter as a solemn promise, which as Walter argues, fatally ‘shifted the rhetorical contest from the terrain of economic management to trustworthiness’.

As the 2013 election neared, Abbott and shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey could repeatedly charge that nothing ‘this government’ said could be believed, and that the Australian people should not trust it with another three years.

The Gillard period undoubtedly dramatised as seldom before the central importance of maintaining a level of reasonable trust among voters, as well as the difficulties of achieving and maintaining trust in a democratic environment. The fractious debates, ad hominem attacks and relentless negativity that characterised political rhetoric between 2010 and 2013 may have been peculiarly bitter and desperate given the circumstances of a hung parliament and an unusually insecure government, but they emphasised an obvious point — one sometimes neglected by people longing for the Deakinite ideal to be realised in Australia — that democratic politics is, with rare exceptions, a politics of dissent and opposition. Democratic rhetoric must aim to persuade an always doubting populace of one’s general competence and legitimacy, as well as the wisdom of one’s own policies, while calling into doubt the wisdom and competence of the opposition. One must at the same time meet the challenge of a vociferous, ever clamorous, and often hostile media.

This generally agonistic political environment presents inescapable challenges for every democratic politician. No doubt each would like to be seen as realising the ideal of speaking plainly from the heart, thus inspiring trust and respect if not necessarily agreement. This is far from easy to accomplish while trying to survive in the political bearpit, where others have a vested interest
in undermining one’s credibility at every point. Speech is the essential tool of
offence, defence and justification, but political speech, in a world where an
ill-chosen word can invite censure or even calamity, must be carefully judged
and sometimes carefully crafted. Walter criticises the Gillard government in
this respect for failing to understand even basic points of rhetorical strategy,
but this is to remind us of the importance of having a rhetorical strategy and
implementing it well. The irony is that the demand for democratic speech to
be open, honest and straight-shooting can be met only by careful (and not too
blatant) calculation (see Kane and Patapan 2010).

This artless art is doubly difficult because room for rhetorical manoeuvre is
constricted, not just by one’s own missteps, but by history, specifically the
history of political rhetoric itself. Walter traces the shift in rhetoric after
Costello’s charter of budget honesty in 1998 from a concern with ‘social justice’
to a central concern for ‘responsible economic management’, and its associated
term ‘fiscal discipline’. We are reminded, as so often in this collection, that
the rhetorical contest is to a large extent fought over the issue of who can
successfully ‘frame’ debate, so that one’s opponents have little option but to
fight on conceptual grounds favourable to one’s own cause. Although Rudd
defeated Howard in 2007 by reassuring Australians that he was an ‘economic
conservative’, ultimately the victory belonged to the conservatives who had
made this framing necessary, and who could point the finger at Labor profligacy
in its response to the global financial crisis. They had also, of course, set the
budget surplus trap that the Gillard–Swan team obligingly fell into.

This general theme is theoretically elaborated here by Dennis Grube, who applies
the idea of path dependency to political rhetoric in the Australian context. He
notes that one may often see path dependency in policy — as, for example,
when the coalition parties felt constrained by already sunk costs to adopt
their own version of Rudd’s National Broadband Network plan, despite having
condemned it as bad policy — but claims that it is also observable in rhetorical
practice. The history that matters in the examples Grube provides is the more
immediate one of politicians’ past pronouncements, which once spoken entrap
them in a ‘gilded cage’ of their own making. One hears much about ‘narrative’ in
politics these days, and the need for politicians to craft a convincing one. Grube
accepts that politicians have no choice but to define central policy imperatives
aimed at realising some vision of national advancement, but notes that in so
doing they also necessarily define themselves politically and, having done so,
inevitably constrict their space for future manoeuvre and change. Thus when
Rudd called climate change ‘the greatest moral, economic and social challenge
of our time’, one demanding firm and unflinching leadership that he would
provide through the introduction of an emissions trading scheme, he laid down
a test of his own leadership, commitment and sincerity that it would prove extremely damaging to squib — as he eventually did, starting the decline in his hitherto remarkable public approval ratings that led to his downfall.

It is at such times that people are likely to say a politician’s words have proved to be ‘just rhetoric’, yet this case and the others Grube provides (Gillard’s ‘no carbon tax’ promise and Abbott’s ‘turn back the boats’ policy) show that one’s own rhetoric can pose a considerable danger to one’s political fortunes. To be sure, electorates are generally patiently long-suffering, their judgement of leaders being normally cumulative over repeated experience of leadership talk and performance. Moreover, their scepticism about the typically evasive speech of politicians surely provides a margin of toleration by perennially suppressing expectations — especially during election campaigns when an implicit bargain seems to exist between candidate and people: ‘I’ll pretend to be sincere in what I promise if you pretend to believe me.’ But there are promises and ‘core’ promises, the latter creating public perceptions and expectations that, when upset by policy U-turns, can only with great difficulty be successfully renegotiated. The lesson is that *speech matters* in politics, and matters in consequential ways. Politicians will eventually be judged for good or ill according to their ethos, that is to their character as publicly assessed through a combination of their words and deeds.

But if perceptions of character are important, then political rivals inevitably have a keen interest in influencing those perceptions. If, as noted, trust was a dominant theme of the Rudd–Gillard years, it was always one closely related to character. Unprecedented personal attacks were mounted, not only between government and opposition, but in Labor’s intra-party disputes over the leadership. Whatever Rudd’s public persona, his alleged private character as revealed in interactions with colleagues and administrators was, after his fall and to forestall his return, savagely condemned by members of his own party. This gave opportunity to Abbott’s strategy team during the 2013 election, who reportedly received a psychiatric evaluation of Rudd as a ‘grandiose narcissist’ that they used to target his supposed Achilles heel — overconfidence (Williams 2013). Gillard for her part was, despite her stiff public persona, generally reported to be warm and personable in private, but her political character was constantly impugned, particularly after her broken promise on the carbon tax when enemies began cruelly to label her ‘Ju-liar’. She hardly helped her own cause, after her ascent, by promising to reveal ‘the real Julia’, as though her former self-presentation had been a sham. Labor members nevertheless believed, despite their travails, that they had an ace-in-the-hole with Abbott’s perceived character as former ‘attack dog’ of Howard’s coalition, his crude style seeming to disqualify him for leadership and render him ‘unelectable’. Rudd returned to lead the charge against Abbott conscious of the widespread public disgust and dismay at the tone and manner of recent politics. He promised a return to the
rhetorical ideal of dignified civil debate over policy issues, eschewing ‘negative’ campaigning, but after a week of flailing he desperately resumed the character attacks. The Australian people were told not to trust Abbott, a man who would ‘cut to the bone’ people’s entitlements and, despite his denials, restore punitive labour laws, a man who was misogynistic, out-of-touch and a social conservative (sotto voce, Catholic). Rudd’s reversal was interpreted as a capitulation to the reality that, whatever people profess to want, they are susceptible to negativity. The rhetorical ideal inevitably succumbed to the pressing exigencies of a politics of competition in which winning is all and honourable defeat meaningless.

Ideals and ideologies

Was this period atypical of Australian politics over the long run? After reading the astute analyses in this collection one may indeed think that political rhetoric hit some new low during the years of fractured Labor government. The historical contrasts of Rayner and Walter seem to suggest things were better done in the past (and indeed, in recent years, the Hawke–Keating years of reform have acquired something of an exemplary status across the political spectrum, while the Howard years appear more and more as an era of firmness and stability). Rolfe’s essay, however, argues that the general tendency to imagine a golden age of rhetoric is, like all golden ages, largely an exercise in myth-making. Rolfe argues that we rightly expect (or hope) that our leaders will possess the self-mastery and judgement necessary to make prudent choices on our behalf, and that the apparent lack of these qualities during the Rudd–Gillard years naturally tempted us to look longingly to a lost ideal.3 He relates how Australians have traditionally looked to masterful rhetoricians from British and American as well as Australian political history. He also notes, however, that old heroes were hardly venerated by their contemporaries, as they were by posterity, but rather suffered and struggled in the usual rough-and-tumble of political contest. Rolfe does not dismiss mythologising, which he says is intrinsic to political experience and provides a ground of community for leaders and their constituents that can give rhetoric its essential purchase. A tradition of great leaders whose words and deeds have put a distinctive stamp upon history forms a common bond, a reference point that is both a regulative ideal and an enduring rhetorical resource for everyday politics, though arguments over the standards these ideals embody are simply a part of the ongoing contest that is a permanent feature of liberal democracy.

This is no doubt true, for traditions themselves are open to reinterpretation and critique, as the reference to Howard’s ‘history wars’ above suggests. Deakin, 3 Or to a current fictional one, specifically to the characters in The West Wing who are described in Rolfe’s essay.
the exemplary Australian rhetorician whom Rolfe references in passing, put his talents to the service of a nation with which many contemporary Australians, despite inheriting it, would not wish to identify. As Hearn and Tregenza explain, Deakin’s ideal was of his time, mixing liberal values of equality and class accommodation with masculinist assumptions about gender roles as well as with racially informed xenophobia. The Deakinite rhetoric of white Australia has long since been repudiated by the rhetoric, first of assimilation, and then of multiculturalism, but the legacy of decades of the White Australia policy can hardly be so easily sloughed off. The ‘cage’ within which acceptable rhetoric may occur shifts its shape and boundaries over historical time, imposing new imperatives and making different demands on rhetoricians trying to achieve their political ends or advantages. It is impossible now, except on extremist fringes, to deploy the frank racialism of Deakin, although one may employ the ‘dog-whistle’ rhetoric that Hindess analyses: ‘a way of sending a prejudicial message to certain potential supporters in such a way as to make it inaudible to others whom it might alienate.’

Hindess, to be sure, reclassifies dog-whistling as just a particular species within the genus ‘coded message’ that forms the normal currency of political rhetoric. One of the targets of his critique is Robert Goodin who talks of the ‘perniciousness’ and ‘fundamental perversity’ of dog-whistle politics. It is perverse because it allegedly undermines democratic deliberation and destroys any sense of a democratic mandate (Goodin and Saward 2005; Goodin 2008). The argument here is between the hopeful idealist — who would see political rhetoric purified, stripped of ulterior intentions and devoted to reasonable discussion of good policy — and the realist who believes that political rhetoric will never be anything but political. If there is an advantage to be gained, politicians can be expected to craft their rhetoric to appeal to our baser feelings as much as to the better angels of our nature. And those who condemn such practices, Hindess says, will generally find they are indulging in coded messages of their own (for example about ‘those benighted people who fall for this stuff’).

Hindess’s other contribution to this collection points to the difficulty of managing rhetoric, even when one is conscientiously aiming at our better angels and striving to achieve laudable goals in appropriate language. The problem is that we may be caught by our linguistic heritage, a case of Grube’s path dependency writ large. Hindess analyses the ‘Little children are sacred’ report into child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities, which he claims, despite its good intentions, inadvertently gave the Howard government an excuse to send troops to police Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. He takes particular issue with the linguistic contrast between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ and the residue this carries of the West’s rhetoric of progress, with its inherent assumptions of superiority versus inferiority. The report’s authors, he says,
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despite striving to be neutral do not manage to avoid this trap. We normally think of rhetoric as words spoken with intention, but in such cases our language seems to speak us, with unintended consequences. The rhetorical ideal proves hard to grasp even when we mean to.

Melissa Lovell traverses the same territory, bringing the tools of Foucauldian critical theory to bear on the question of how coercive approaches to Aboriginal governance became ‘normalised’ in Australian political discourse, particularly by proponents of neoliberal politics who object to government intervention in other circumstances (notably in the provision of welfare services). In examining the idea of Aboriginal ‘development’, Lovell shows how neoliberal rhetoric linked a market economy and ‘proper’ jobs with the production of capable citizens and functional communities, factors that were ignored by the old land rights legislation that aimed at preserving spiritual links between Aboriginal people and their land. The justifications for coercive governance, she says, depended on a particular population being identified as incapable of self-discipline and a simultaneous explanation of why more facilitative processes would not succeed. Lovell’s aim is to ‘destabilise the authority’ of such discourses by pointing out their incoherence and contingency, and thus open up the possibility of alternative and presumably more benign discourses.

Neoliberalist discourse (under its original Australian moniker, economic rationalism) is also the subject of the paper by Geoffrey Stokes, painted on the much wider canvas of the entire political economy. Here the rhetorical ideal finds expression in the language of free markets, efficiency, deregulation, anti-protectionism and so on. This rhetoric is peculiarly effective because it presents itself under the banner of neutral science — specifically economic science — whose policy admonitions it would be irrational to defy, thus closing down debate and effective opposition. It is a case of rhetorical capture of the field on a grand scale, forcing even Labor leaders, as we noted, to adopt the language of ‘responsible economic management’. In this regard, one might note how the Aristotelian categories — *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* — apply to the understanding of economic rationalism when viewed as a form of rhetoric: the *logos* is economic free market theory; its *ethos* or character is embodied in its claim to being a value-free science untainted by politics, rendering it deserving of our trust; its *pathos*, or ability to motivate an audience, lies in its promise to deliver individual and national prosperity more surely than any other system. It is an intrinsic presumption of rhetoric as persuasion that alternative choices must exist from which one needs to be dissuaded. A rhetoric that pretends not to be rhetoric, but scientific fact, tries to be maximally persuasive by informing you that (as Margaret Thatcher famously said) ‘There is no alternative!’
The stakes of political rhetoric

It may seem a long way from an analysis of Gillard’s defence of her leadership to a discussion of the dominant contemporary ideology of neoliberalism, yet all these essays fall under the rubric of rhetoric. Moreover there is a close connection between the microcosm of party politics and the macrocosmic context of a globalised economy. For one thing, when Australian parties come into government their central challenge is to ‘manage’ the little corner of the global system that is Australia with far fewer levers of control, following deregulation, than parties had in former times. Abbott and Hockey, having gained the glittering prize, are most sensitively conscious of this fact as they face the uncertainties of the global economy.

The problem is perhaps even more pressing for Labor in opposition. The question of character bears not just on individuals, but on the organisations to which they belong and, as Labor tries to heal its wounds and regroup, there has been much comment on what the party now stands for, if anything. Despite repeated hoary references to ‘true believers’ and ‘Labor values’, it is manifestly not the party it once was. It does not even pretend any longer that socialism is a valid goal, or one that it aspires to, but merely promises to manage the economy better and perhaps more fairly than its rivals. But here it is very much playing an away game on its opponents’ home ground. The task for Bill Shorten and his team is not just to devise policies and oppose the government, but to rebuild an organisation that has heart and soul enough to convince present and future generations of Australians that it deserves support. This is a rhetorical task of the first order and it will require considerable imagination, courage and political skill to accomplish.

The stakes for Australian rhetoric are therefore very high. To be sure, politics is more than rhetoric — it is also policy and action — but rhetoric remains fundamental. One of the lessons emerging from this collection is that, in politics, words are never innocent. Words have power, both to create and destroy. Political speakers know the possibilities and the dangers; they are acutely aware of the power of words — their own and others — to do them either harm or good. Having always a vested interest in the success or failure of their rhetorical intentions, they must continuously weigh, calculate and choose each word. They cannot afford an unguarded moment.

This makes the Deakinite ideal of political rhetoric, in which no gap exists between the sincere belief of the speaker and the speech delivered, a difficult one to realise. Democratic people may hope for frank truth telling from their leaders, who are after all their servants, but frankness will not always serve in a fiercely competitive environment. Moreover the sovereign people, like all
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sovereigns, must occasionally be flattered, and flattery and frank truth telling are mutually exclusive. No doubt Mitt Romney spoke the truth to his well-heeled audience when he dismissed the 47 per cent of ordinary Americans who would not vote for him, but it was not a truth that endeared him to the mass of people when it leaked out, and in fact it damaged his electoral chances. This is not to say that politicians never tell the truth — or never can tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth — but you can bet that when they do they have carefully calculated beforehand the political consequences of doing so. And so they must if they are to survive and succeed.

Rhetoric, therefore, is vital but perennially problematic. Even the apparently most sincere, straightforward example of political speech must be scrutinised, analysed and contextualised in order to reveal the layers of its meaning and political intention. This is the task of political scientists, theorists and commentators. It requires considerable acuity and some subtlety to perform it well, and it has been performed well in the diverse but always enlightening papers of this excellent collection.

References


