Symbolic politics in the high technology debate in Australia

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SYMBOLIC POLITICS IN THE HIGH TECHNOLOGY DEBATE IN AUSTRALIA

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

R. A. JOSEPH, B.Sc. (Hons.), M.Sc.

Department of Science and Technology Studies, 1987
In memory of my late Father,

ALBERT JOSEPH

1911-1986
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DECLARATION

This work has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution.

R.A. JOSEPH
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Author's Publications Relating to this Research Topic


Technology Parks: a study of their relevance to industrial and technological development in New South Wales. A Report to the NSW Department of Industrial Development and Decentralisation, DIDD, Sydney, 1986.

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PREFACE

This doctoral thesis is, in essence, a commentary on Australian science and technology policy. It represents also, an important personal achievement, in that it attempts to impose some form of order and sense on my experience with Australian science and technology policy. This experience has been varied, covering the perspectives of public servant, academic researcher, consultant, an active member of a professional society (Australian Institute of Physics) and, of course, student.

Inevitably, the thesis, in its final form, has been strongly influenced by this experience. First, as an undergraduate student in Queensland (1975-78) and later as a post-graduate at Manchester University (1979-80) in the U.K., I was able to gain an appreciation of the importance of industry and technology policy for Australia and other countries. Second, for the following four years which were spent in the public service in Canberra (1981-84), I was primarily involved in the analysis of science and technology policy. One of the main benefits of working in a number of positions in technology-related departments was the experience at first-hand of inter-departmental politics and the chance to participate in policy-making itself (e.g. The National Technology Strategy). Another benefit was an opportunity to see how the bureaucracy coped with the change of federal government from the Liberal-National Coalition to Labor in March 1983. Finally, my position in the public service provided that flexibility in employment conditions which enabled me to experience other dimensions of the political process. Included in this was a two month secondment to Wollongong University (Jan.-Feb. 1984) to assist writing a report on regional technology transfer, a four month consultancy with the NSW Department of Industrial Development and Decentralisation (July-Nov. 1985) studying technology parks, an association with the Australian Institute
of Physics as Secretary to its Science Policy Committee and of course, the chance to complete this thesis full-time.

My special 'inside' position introduces a breadth of personal experience and knowledge which is uniquely valuable and relevant to the writing of this thesis. Of course, being so close to the subject matter can, unintentionally, limit one's perspectives and even inadvertently lead to the exclusion of some events which from another view may be seen to be quite important. With these advantages and disadvantages in mind, every attempt has been made to provide a non-biased view as possible.

It should be stressed that at a very basic level, the perspective chosen for this thesis has been influenced by my experience of the policy-making process and the everyday business of discussing issues with colleagues and absorbing and accepting the culture of an organisation. At a greater level of detail, this experience suggests the following points as being crucially important:

- the importance of political rhetoric, both within the bureaucracy and in wider political debate

- a divergence or at least inconsistency between the allocation of resources to new technology and its prominence and function in political debate

- a lack of clarity in the definition of issues and the appropriateness of terms

- an adherence and dominance of certain powerful phrases or ideas by parts of the bureaucracy and in political debate generally.
The theoretical perspective chosen for this thesis, namely that of symbolic politics, reflects my experience and consequently, is a subjective judgement of what is most important. While this does not capture everything, I believe the choice of theory and subject matter (the high technology debate in Australia) are adequate for achieving my aim of imposing some sense and meaning onto the recent and important political debate concerning high technology.

Wollongong
October 1987
ABSTRACT

Symbolic Politics in the High Technology Debate in Australia

High technology has become prominent in political debate in Australia since the early 1980s. It has been portrayed in debate as being of national significance and vital to the future well-being of the Australian economy. The aim of this study is to examine the nature of high technology through politics by analysing the contemporary high technology debate in Australia. The framework adopted for the analysis is that of symbolic politics.

Symbolic politics highlights the importance of both instrumental political activity and expressive political activity. The former deals with what is normally thought of as political activity such as bargaining for funds and power. The latter analyses the form, function and context of political language. Symbolic forms such as political rhetoric, symbols and political myths can function to give events political meaning and cue responses from interest groups.

The argument begins with background to the emerging high technology debate in Australia during 1975-80. In this debate there was dispute over the role of technology in the economy, the role of government in promoting it and the precise meaning of the term high technology. It can be postulated that high technology has a political dimension. The framework of symbolic politics is developed for this analysis. It is argued that this framework is both relevant to technology because of technology's highly symbolic nature and to Australia. The framework is applied at two distinct levels. First, the high technology debate in Australia from 1981-86 is analysed as a sequence of events or 'news'. The rhetoric used in the debate
provides an insight into the role of high technology in political processes. Second, the policy-making process is analysed using the symbolic forms of political myth and ritual. The policy areas of technology parks and venture capital in Australia are studied in detail.

In the high technology debate in Australia, high technology has been associated with economic growth and the future well-being of Australia. These claims are not self-evident. The symbolism associated with high technology was particularly powerful in that it provided a source of political cues for others to have faith in high technology and the benefits it might bring. This faith in turn bestowed even greater force on high technology as a symbol. The important symbolic role of high technology in political debate can be seen from the way it was manipulated by the former Department of Science and Technology and its Minister, Barry Jones. High technology rhetoric was used in political debate in an attempt to gain authority and set the political agenda.

In high technology policy-making, political myth and ritual have played an important role. These symbolic forms helped to simplify complex issues, overcome contradictions and guide policy development for high technology. The post-industrial society myth and the Silicon Valley myth were important in Australia. Symbolic politics provides a revealing perspective on high technology in Australian politics and the underlying political forces which are likely to continue to shape debate in this area of national interest.