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BLOG: The language of election speak

Anthony Ashbolt

University of Wollongong, aashbolt@uow.edu.au

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BLOG: The language of election speak

Abstract

Language is often the first thing that suffers during an election campaign, writes Anthony Ashbolt. We are, as the first week of election campaigning draws to a close, in a period that George Orwell might have called "election-speak". Language is used in increasingly magical ways. When Humpty Dumpty noted that words meant what he wanted them to mean, he might have had political campaigns in mind. Language is very often the first thing that suffers during such contests and along with that genuine meaning departs rapidly. Until last week the Gonski (or now Better Schools) proposals were anathema to the Coalition. Then suddenly the Opposition was supposedly at one with the Government on education funding. American political pundits call this flip-flopping but to us it the standard fare of politics.

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By ANTHONY ASHBOLT Aug. 9, 2013, 10 p.m.



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The Opposition criticised increased subsidies to the auto industry heavily until the Government announced it would monitor a fringe benefits tax already in place. All hell broke loose, the car industry was in free-fall and the Opposition cried shame. This meshed neatly with the "no new taxes" pledge of Abbott. The fact that it was not a new tax at all meant nothing because the conjuring trick had worked.

Then the Government's proposed injection of funds into the car industry was simply, we were informed by the Coalition, reckless spending. So, too, a low interest rate, once for the Coalition a measure of monetary responsibility now means the economy is down the drain. Meaning floats on a tide of words that have lost their moorings.

The public is left gasping (or just confused) as figures are pulled from the air and bandied about with gay abandon, whether it is debt, projected deficits, promised surpluses or a combination of tax relief combined with increased revenue through responsible savings.

Presumably such responsible savings as promised by Abbott and Hockey would involve massive cuts but those are two words we do not hear. And if we do hear the word "cuts" it is in relation to a "bloated" public service generally rather than to hospitals, schools, transport or other forms of public infrastructure specifically.

We might also have thought Labor would have learnt its lesson about promising surpluses following the now revised mini-budget of less than three months ago and the acknowledgement that a surplus could not be achieved immediately as (foolishly) planned.

The Government feels compelled to use the language of surplus because deficit has come to mean what Humpty says it should mean – something to be avoided at almost all costs. So even while acknowledging a shift in fortunes, Government must promise a surplus down the track when it has absolutely no idea what might happen down the track. The very reason for a revised mini-budget is the volatility in the market reflected by brakes being placed on the Chinese market and a rapidly declining Australian dollar. That volatility could well intensify over the next few years thus making promises of a surplus vacuous.

Frighten the public with notions of credit card debt and they will run a mile. Promise them better schools, hospitals, public transport and they might just take notice. Yet such promises could depend upon deficit spending for quite a while.

The simple fact is that by international standards the Australian government deficit is low, its debt is relatively insignificant and its economic performance while slowing is still well in advance

of most OECD countries.

Infrastructure spending helped rescue Australia from the GFC. For the Opposition to not only write infrastructure spending out of the GFC frame of reference but also to demonise such spending is simply disingenuous.

Yet, it is also true that appearances and marketing these days matter and the government has presented itself at times as a rabble and has failed to market positives like the NBN in a coherent and confident fashion.

Conspiracy theories about Murdoch opposing the Government's NBN are not convincing. Labor itself has, for whatever reason, not been adept at persuading people that the NBN to the home has distinct advantages for the economy generally, small business particularly, and the people as a whole.

Nonetheless, on the recent policy front Labor has extended a very attractive offer to families with young children – a \$450 million dollar boost to after-hours school care.

This will have resonance in the western suburbs of Sydney, in particular, where Labor's job is to hold on to seats that are still under significant threat.

Do not imagine for a moment that the return of Rudd and the attempt to neutralise the asylum seeker issue has saved every western suburbs seat, let alone regained the lost Queensland ones.

Catapulting Peter Beattie into Forde is clever thinking, at one level, yet a sign of desperation at another. Rudd's election slogan promises us something new and we get Beattie!

Moreover, picture book charm can only take you so far: "I'm Kevin, I'm from Queensland and I'm here to help. His name's Peter, he's from Queensland and he's here to help as well." Alice was delighted by the helping hand extended but also rather puzzled because she was from NSW.

Abbott's unity ticket with Labor on education funding is a mirage as the promise extends for four years only and this leaves a \$7 billion shortfall. So Labor can still claim a significant advantage in after-school care and school education.

Add to that the interest rate cut, the unemployment rate remaining steady and the Opposition's refusal to provide proper costings for some of its key policies, then arguably it has been Labor's week on the policy front.

The Opposition's promise to cut corporate tax by 1.5% appeals to most of the big end of town but will gain little traction with ordinary voters. That said, Labor has a lot of catching up to do and a barrage of media flak to combat in which words and meanings get sacrificed too readily at the altar of electoral expediency.

Murdoch and his Australian newspapers are campaigning actively for an Abbott Government. Thus the subtle Daily Telegraph headline accompanied by a photo of Kevin Rudd on Monday: 'Now you finally have the chance to... KICK THIS MOB OUT'. At least there is no doubt about meaning here, no attempt to obscure, camouflage or hide true intents.

If nothing else, Murdoch can be blatant in his honesty, as when he told British Members of Parliament investigating the phone-hacking scandal: "this is the most humble day of my life".

Since that time, he has reaffirmed such admirable humility on a daily basis. For Murdoch, humble means hubris and, as Humpty might have observed, why not?

Dr Anthony Ashbolt is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wollongong. He specialises in American politics and history but has taught and written about Australian politics and media politics for many years. He will be blogging for the Mercury on the Federal election campaign.

Dr Ashbolt is the main editor of the labour history journal Illawarra Unity and the author of A Cultural History of the Radical Sixties in the San Francisco Bay Area (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013). He is also co-author (with colleague Glenn Mitchell) of a chapter in the recently published Red Strains: Music and Communism outside the Communist Bloc (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Many of his other publications can be found at Research Online at the University of Wollongong.