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BLOG: Australia's rude, crude election debate

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BLOG: Australia's rude, crude election debate

Abstract

Tony Abbott's spin on the de Niro catchphrase reveals the depths to which we have sunk, writes Anthony Ashbolt. Like Robert de Niro in *Taxi Driver*, Abbott turned to his sparring partner and said, in an admittedly less than menacing voice, "Does this guy ever shut up?" Abbott's tame version of "You talkin' to me?" sent a jarring note through the debate on Wednesday night and was a reminder of the lack of civility in politics I discussed in my [first blog](#). This is simply not the stuff of genuine debate and in an ordinary contest might have sent Abbott and the Coalition reeling. Judging by Morgan opinion polls in western Sydney reported this morning it had no such effect and, rather, bolstered the claims of some journalists that focus groups had clearly told Liberal advisors that an intervention like this from Abbott would go down well with the electorate. Rudd, the focus groups feel, tends towards verbosity and his wordiness helps switch people off.

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BLOG: Australia's rude, crude election debate

By ANTHONY ASHBOLT Aug. 23, 2013, 7:05 p.m.



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This is simply not the stuff of genuine debate and in an ordinary contest might have sent Abbott and the Coalition reeling. Judging by Morgan opinion polls in western Sydney reported this morning it had no such effect and, rather, bolstered the claims of some journalists that focus groups had clearly told Liberal advisors that an intervention like this from Abbott would go down well with the electorate. Rudd, the focus groups feel, tends towards verbosity and his wordiness helps switch people off.

PREVIOUS BLOG: Campaign dull and boring (<http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1710549/blog-campaign-dull-and-boring/?cs=12>)

Strangely, these focus groups apparently see nothing wrong with the sometimes stumbling hesitancy of Abbott, his lack of command of statistics and detail. Where Gillard's slow deliberateness seemed to talk down to the audience, Abbott's slow fumbling nature with words does not raise concern. Part of the problem is that the mass media have simply not subjected Abbott's leadership to adequate scrutiny. And I want to use this blog to examine briefly the way that the media can help shape political culture, can mould the attitudes and prejudices of voters such that some things are on the agenda and others have been shoved off.

Six years ago Rudd rode to victory not only on the back of a clever public relations campaign ('Kevin 07' was its centerpiece) but with a clarion call about the significance of climate change: "Climate change is the great moral challenge of our generation." This had resonance then, it no longer does. Why? How can such a shift in opinion occur when the challenge has become no less great and when the scientific evidence mounts on a daily basis to substantiate Rudd's declaration? We are, after all, not talking about the survival of a reef here or an island nation there (important as they are) but of the planet as a whole.

The answer is that an effective and quite ignorant campaign was waged by the Opposition and remained essentially unchallenged by the mass media and actively supported by the Murdoch press. Through it all, Labor did itself no good by failing to maintain a consistent position in support of taking up "the great moral challenge". Even when forced into adopting a carbon tax by a deal with the Greens and the independents, Labor pursued the policy with little conviction. Stress was put on the compensation people would be given to alleviate the effects of the tax not upon its benefits for the community as a whole. And so weird has the politics become that an incoming Abbott Government will keep the compensation while abolishing the tax. Ordinarily, such a policy would be laughed out of court but the political game is being played in increasingly strange ways. It is a little like withdrawing the troops from Afghanistan next year but leaving quite a few nonetheless, precisely Government policy. Orwell would have noted the absurd contradictions abounding in contemporary politics and the way that words and meanings have departed company.

Sections of the media are now raising questions about the Coalition environmental policy and specifically policy relating to climate change (<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal->

The Climate Institute is beginning to be quoted more frequently, with the *Sydney Morning Herald* this week reporting that the Coalition promise of greenhouse reductions of 5 per cent by 2020 is underfunded to the tune of \$4 billion and, instead, we will be looking at a 9 per cent increase in emissions. This, effectively, means that solar and renewable energy industries will be sidelined. While the costing is denied by the Coalition, when have we heard from Abbott any words that come even close to Rudd's "great moral challenge"? The historical record shows quite the opposite, with Abbott dragged kicking and screaming out of (or perhaps only partly out of) the "climate sceptics" camp (Orwell might have had something to say about the word "sceptics" being used here when a far more appropriate one is available).

Richard Kingsford wrote a valuable article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* this week focusing upon the relative [absence of environmental debate](http://www.smh.com.au/comment/clueless-and-careless-about-the-environment-20130820-2s94h.html) (<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/clueless-and-careless-about-the-environment-20130820-2s94h.html>) from the campaign of the two major parties.

And he is hardly alone, with the Australian Conservation Foundation adding its [voice](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/major-parties-rate-poorly-on-environment-acf/4898316) (<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/major-parties-rate-poorly-on-environment-acf/4898316>).

Only one question on the environment featured in the debate this week but at least it helped make the focus somewhat different. Kingsford explains the situation well:

As the federal election draws close, the rhetoric is all about business opportunities and presumably growing a "big Australia", with no discussion of the consequences for the environment.

The two major parties are committed to making northern Australia the "food bowl of Asia", bringing inevitable impacts to one of the most biodiverse regions of the world. New intensive agriculture means clearing native vegetation and taking water from rivers. Dams will have to be built, which will effectively cripple rivers, not to mention degrade estuaries and dependent fisheries.

"The great moral challenge of our generation" remains, as do other environmental issues. We were willing to listen to this six years ago. Now we are deaf. Such is the dire state of contemporary politics.

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.

He 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.