

Political discourses in New Zealand: Constructions of political parties

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The following study sets out to identify the discursive resources which were used by Prime Minister Jim Bolger and the leader of the Opposition Helen Clark in two speeches delivered at Massey University's Winter Lecture Series in 1994. Resources such as pronoun use and rhetorical devices were examined to show how the speakers constructed versions of both the National and Labour parties. We conclude that Bolger's speech works to justify and warrant Government policies. Clark's speech is an attempt to establish the viability of Labour as an alternative.

We are surrounded by the voices of politicians. Their comments and views are pervasive in the media and inform our political world views. Given the powerful positions that politicians occupy, psychologists have had a long term interest in the influence of political leaders. This paper concerns the way in which political party leaders constitute their own and opposing parties in two public speeches.

Prior to the 1950s, political psychology was dominated by an emphasis on personality predispositions strengthened by both psychoanalytic and psychometric traditions (Sears, 1987). Criticism of this approach led to an expansion of the field to include a wider variety of personal characteristics including attitudes, motives, decision style and expertise (Greenstein, 1975). More recently, there has been increasing interest in political discourse (Ensink, van Essen & Van der Geest, 1986).

Stemming from the disciplines of oratory and rhetoric, students of political communication have delineated political messages, especially those of a presidential nature, as a specific rhetorical genre, with the symbolic function of sanctifying and legitimising power (Campbell & Jamieson, 1986; Corcoran, 1994).

McCarthy (1993, 1994) used a rhetorical/semiotic approach to examine the political messages of the leaders of the Liberal and Labour parties prior to the 1993 Australian national election.

In contrast to 'communication' approaches, recent researchers have focused on language as social action. Atkinson (1983, 1984) and Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) have analysed the form of verbal constructions in political speeches that arouse positive audience response. Corcoran (1994), in his analysis of presidential concession speeches, used the idiom of dramaturgy and speech act theory, framing concession speeches as a form of political action rather than as a type of rhetoric. WAUDAG (1990) examined the theoretical devices and grammatical structures used in George Bush's inaugural address to construct the president, as a voice of the collective identity. McCreanor (1993) used a speech delivered by the Minister of Justice, Doug Graham in 1992, to examine changes in the discourses constructing Maori Pakeha relations.

The discursive approach employed in the current research shares with these studies a concern with the identification of discursive resources, and their use to meet specific political ends (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Discursive resources are culturally and historically embedded; they are the tools through which particular versions of social objects are produced and warranted. Their use may be deliberate in order to produce desired effects, although they also produce unintended effects. Discursive resources include interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), rhetorical devices and metaphors but are not limited to these, and may also include social power relations between speakers. A comprehensive discourse analysis is necessarily beyond the scope of any one project, and therefore discourse analytic work needs to be focused on aspects of these resources. In our analysis we are concerned with the differing constructions of the two major political parties

and the functions that these constructions serve. This focus precludes a systematic analysis of rhetorical devices or interpretative repertoires, instead we take an eclectic approach to identifying key features of each construction. We have examined each speaker's version of both parties and present the key features, including ideologically loaded phrases (Burman & Parker, 1992), pronoun use and rhetorical devices, where they contribute to the effect of the construction.

Context

Prior to analysis we offer our understanding of the historical and current political context in which the speeches were made. We acknowledge that this understanding is itself a construction, drawn from our own discursive resources.

Labour Party

The New Zealand Labour Party was established in 1916. Gustafson (1989) notes that, throughout most of its early history, the Labour Party stated that its purpose was to educate the public in principles of co-operation and socialism. The objective of the Labour Party as stated in their 1919 constitution was the "socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange" (Harris, Levine, Clark, Martin & McLeay, 1994, p. 138). Labour increasingly moved away from early theoretical influences, in favour of such concepts as social justice in the 1970s (Gustafson, 1989) and democratic socialism in their 1991 edition of the Constitution and Rules of the New Zealand Labour Party (Harris et al., 1994). Labour traditionally was known as the party committed to providing economic and social policies that would result in a decent standard of living for all people, and an equitable distribution of goods and services. The first Labour Government in 1935 implemented the welfare state. Following their election to power in 1984, Labour completely rejected the monetary policies that were fundamental to the thinking of previous Labour Governments (such as state intervention in the economy, and the redistribution of wealth through taxation and the welfare state) in favour of freemarket policies (Gustafson, 1989). These policies were more in line with the objectives of the opposing National party than traditional Labour policies on the economy. In the nineties Labour is appealing to the traditional values of the Labour party advocating policies based on social justice, while reminding voters that the current direction of the country toward an open and competitive economy can not be revoked.

National Party

The National Party was officially established in 1936. This new party represented the unification of the Reform and Liberal parties, under the common motive of opposing the socialist and bureaucratic intervention which was implemented by the Labour Party (Gustafson, 1986). The fundamental difference between the National and Labour parties was their economic policy. The following quote from the National Party's 1938 Manifesto illustrates the basic beliefs informing National's economic policy:

"...the National Party believes in the present system of private enterprise and seeks to develop it in accordance with the philosophy of personal freedom, initiative, thrift and private ownership of all property..." (Harris et al., 1994, p. 146).

The belief in private enterprise and individual ownership has characterised the National Party from its inception and consistently appears in party manifestos and the Constitution and Rules of the National Party to the present day (Harris et al., 1994). Wood (1989) notes that in the years after 1949, and the advent of the first National Government, the contrast between 'private enterprise' National and 'socialist' Labour was modest, although National exaggerated these differences in rhetoric and policy gesture.

In 1984 Labour was elected amid accusations that the preceding National Government had displayed reckless economic management and had overregulated the economy. National's credibility as a free enterprise party had been damaged by this interventionism. Labour, with its move toward "economic growth through enterprise, opportunity and initiative" (Harris et al., 1994, p. 204), won provincial votes usually taken by National. In 1990, New Zealanders voted National back into power, and today National governs with a policy of private enterprise and competition, marking a decisive return to its traditional ideology.

The Speeches

The following is an analysis of two political speeches delivered in 1994. The first was given by Helen Clark, leader of the Labour Party and Opposition to the National Government, as an opening address to the Massey University Winter Lecture Series. The second speech, delivered by Jim Bolger the Prime Minister and leader of the National Government, was the closing address. These addresses are closely monitored and widely reported by the media, and attended by students, academic staff, business leaders and community representatives. Our analysis is based on copies of the written speeches.

Analysis

The speaking positions of both leaders constrain the discourses in fundamental ways. These constraints are manifest in the contrasting functions of the two political addresses. In Bolger's speech he works to justify and warrant Government policies. Clark, as the leader of the Opposition, seeks to establish the viability of Labour as an alternative through challenging the effectiveness of National's policies and initiatives, appealing to the success of past Labour Governments, and offering policy directives for the future. Clark's discourse is constrained in that she can not direct the audience to any immediate accomplishments of the Labour Party. In the following section we present our analysis of the contrasting constructions of the National Government and Labour Party.

Bolger On National

Bolger portrays National as focused and organised in their approach to government, dealing with New Zealand's problems in a businesslike and efficient manner.

...To develop if you like a corporate plan for New Zealand so that policy development is coherent and competing claims for resources can be judged against a consistent set of objectives

ex. 1

This extract signals the dominant theme of Bolger's address. That is, National's commitment to creating wealth in New Zealand through the use of a strategic plan - in effect managing the country as a corporation. Other examples include: "...give effect to those priorities by budget allocation..."; "...set up ministries on a businesslike footing"; "...in a business like way..."; "...It details action and priorities...". With this discourse Bolger employs ideologically loaded terms to portray National as highly organised, action oriented and accountable.

Extract 2 follows a lengthy exposition about how quickly the world economy is changing.

In such a dynamic environment there is an absolute need for a strategy to maintain our place in the world.

To do so we need to set out the process by which the strategy is formulated.

The first step was to set out a long term vision for the country taking us through into the next century.

This we did with the publication of *Path to 2010*. The second step....ex. 2

According to Bolger's construction of the world, the rapidly changing environment has created an absolute need for New Zealand to preserve it's economic

position. Bolger simultaneously constructs an "absolute need" for New Zealanders, and presents National's plan as the fulfilment of that need.

The interesting feature of this extract is Bolger's ambiguous and inclusive use of "we" to denote responsibility for the direction for New Zealand. In the beginning of the passage "our" (...our place in the world...) is used to include Bolger, the National Party and the public. In the following sentence "we" could be taken to include the same collective body, however in the third sentence it becomes unclear to whom "us" refers, the National Party or New Zealand as a whole. In the fourth sentence "we" refers to National's publication of the plan (*Path to 2010*). Through the ambiguous use of collective pronouns (us, we and our), Bolger includes all New Zealand as entering into National's plan. National's plan for New Zealand becomes everyone's plan. National does not have a plan, National has the plan. Bolger changes from talking about setting out the process for the strategy, (...to do so we need to set out...) implying that this is something that should be done, to claiming that this process has already been undertaken (...the first step was...). Bolger has used the work up of the "absolute need" to justify actions already taken by the National Party.

In summarising the position and beliefs of the National Government at the end of his address, Bolger repeatedly draws on two rhetorical devices (the three part list and contrasts) that have been found to evoke positive audience responses. In their analysis of political rhetoric Atkinson (1983, 1984) and Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) found that three part lists were used by speakers to produce a variety of actions that consistently drew positive responses from the audience. Contrasts have been identified as serving numerous functions including boasting about self and insulting other.

We believe in progress - not regress.

We prefer to set our standards not by the past but by the future.

We prefer to compare our progress with the fast-expanding economies of South East Asia - rather than by the relatively declining economies of the old world. ex. 3

Extract 3 illustrates Bolger's use of the three part list and the contrast. The contrasts are structured by the inclusion of a preferred and a dispreferred option. The preferred option is presented first, and is clearly identified as a stated preference or belief. The first two parts of the list provide contrasts which emphasise the progressive, forward looking character of the National Party. The third contrast serves to structure the frame of reference for comparisons with "fast-expanding"

economies thereby undermining the legitimacy of comparisons with old world economies. By comparing New Zealand to new economies Bolger warrants current economic policies that take change, expansion and growth as their imperatives.

Clark on the National Government

The primary functions of Clark's address are to undermine, ridicule and criticise the National Government, while offering Labour as a viable alternative. Her account constructs the National Government as disorganised and dictatorial.

But the demolition squad needed more than three years to complete its work. ex. 4

Here Clark is referring to the restructuring of the public and social services implemented by National in their preceding term in government (1990-1993). Clark's use of the "demolition" metaphor strongly implies the Government's approach to restructuring amounted to the destruction of these services without the provision of a useful alternative.

Clark further portrays National as continuing with its programme of economic and social reform despite its lack of support in parliament.

Needless to say, all that (restructuring, economic and social policies) is a tall order for a government with a majority of one. What can be achieved by ministerial and administrative action - as with the closures of public hospital services and the sale of state housing - will no doubt be attempted. But the more grandiose initiatives requiring legislation are vulnerable to desertion of the Government by those elected as National MPs only six months ago. ex. 5

The narrowness of the Government's parliamentary majority is highlighted in an attempt to undermine its authority. The suggestion that restructuring is a "tall order" raises the question of whether the magnitude of the changes might exceed the ability of the Government to effect the changes. Clark makes two claims about the means by which Government restructuring is taking place. Each of these will be dealt with in turn.

Clark's first claim is that what can be achieved by bureaucratic action "will no doubt be attempted". The examples of such "achievements" (closing public hospitals and selling state housing) are both illustrative of actions which have been widely criticised within certain sectors of the community (Morgan, Tuffin, Frederikson, Lyons, & Stephens, 1994). It is further claimed that these achievements result directly from ministerial and administrative action. This attribution of responsibility carries with it the implication that these moves have been imposed by a bureaucracy

which is enacting Government will, rather than responding to public feeling. Clark is suggesting the Government is not accountable to the public.

In claiming that such actions will "no doubt be attempted" Clark indexes the Government's determination to bring about restructuring no matter how unpalatable the changes. The description of such actions as "attempts" implies that they may (or may not) be completed. The use of the word "attempts" acknowledges effort but not necessarily achievement. Clark has already provided a number of reasons (for example, the lack of support) why such attempts may not succeed.

The second means of initiating restructuring is through legislation. Clark talks about the two methods of Government restructuring as firstly bureaucratic, and secondly legislative. The contrastive feature of this construction works to highlight the possibility of bureaucratic intervention circumventing the legislative process. The dubious nature of initiatives requiring legislation is brought into focus when Clark describes them as "grandiose", and implies that they lack the support even of National members. The suggestion that there are serious divisions of opinion within the National Party carries with it the implication that this will impact on the party's ability to effectively govern. Clark implies then, that not only does National lack support in parliament, but also seems incapable of maintaining consensus within party ranks.

Additionally, Clark constructs the Government as lacking a programme and the ability to run the country.

The National Party's objective now is to hang on to power at any cost. Yet it is variously perceived as standing either for nothing or nothing acceptable.... National sits paralysed, throwing up defences around its half finished agenda of restructuring. It can move neither backwards nor forwards - and presents an unappealing prospect to a public angered by the decline in public and social services and the general decline in the community which we see around us. ex. 6

Clark regards the National party as pursuing a single objective and makes assertions about the lengths to which they are prepared to go to fulfil that objective. Clark suggests the objective is to "hang on to power". Hanging on to power is quite different from the alternative construction of "retaining power", which could equally have been employed (Schegloff, 1972). However the notion of retention is avoided as this carries with it the implication that the object (power) is firmly under control, where as hanging on implies more precarious control.

Clark's portrayal of a party which aims to "hang on to power at any cost" highlights their conspicuous single-mindedness, and uncompromising determination

to remain in control. The uncompromising element of this construction stems directly from the claim that the National party will pursue this objective "at any cost". Pomerantz (1986) refers to such devices as extreme case formulations, and suggests they enhance rhetorical effectiveness by emphasising the extremes of relevant dimensions of judgement. A party which is prepared to cling to power at any cost would also be prepared to go to any lengths in the pursuit of power. This construction implies that the National Party is more concerned with its own future/wellbeing than that of New Zealand.

Subsequently, Clark places restrictions on the likelihood of extreme actions on the part of the National Government, given that National represents "nothing or at least nothing acceptable". The Government is described as being "paralysed". Analysis which demonstrates the reliance of both speakers on metaphors of spatial movement highlights the way in which forward movement is positively evaluated (Lyons, Stephens, Morgan, Praat & Tuffin, in press). Clark, in particular, makes consistent reference to positive evaluations associated with forward movement and growth. In view of this analysis, the current characterisation of National as "paralysed", is politically and psychologically damning.

Finally, Clark comments on the Government's unpopularity. Interestingly, she presumes to be able to speak for the public, claiming that they are "angered" by political initiatives which have resulted in a "decline" in both services and the community. She moves to include herself in the body of the angry public - (which we see around us) thus identifying and affiliating herself with the voting people and their problems. Clark further invests the "decline of the community" with the status of fact, appealing to a state of affairs which is presumably observable to everyone (..which we see..).

Clark on Labour

Clark's presentation of Labour differs from her construction of National both in content and rhetorical style. In establishing Labour's viability as an alternative, Clark is unable to refer to immediate past achievements (as National does) to support her argument. Instead she relies on Labour's past achievements to document their ability to give New Zealanders' what they want, and offers promises for the future. However, as the following extract demonstrates, recourse to Labour's past achievements becomes a rhetorical stumbling block as Clark tries to excuse the unpopular reforms of the most recent Labour Government, and refocus audience attention on

successful policy initiatives.

Of course Labour went through a grim patch in the eighties when the Douglas policies of deregulation went at too fast a pace....and when privatisation was pursued contrary to the prevailing public opinion... All in all the memory of the Fourth Labour Government's economic policy has overshadowed its many achievements in social policy, labour law, local government reform, and international relations. *ex. 7*

In identifying unpopular policies with an individual member of the last Labour Government (Douglas), Clark deflects responsibility for these policies from the party as a whole. The admission of a "grim patch", and the subsequent analysis of this as being caused by errors of pace and judgement of public opinion, serve to present Clark as someone who is not afraid to openly admit mistakes. As Wooffitt (1993) has noted, such admissions can be potentially damaging to overriding claims (in this case that Labour is a viable alternative). However the concession of such critical points is one method by which the speaker can minimise the likelihood that her account will be seen as a biased version. Clark's acknowledgement of previous errors positions her as a fair and balanced commentator of political events, thereby bolstering the credibility of her summary of the last Labour Government's achievements.

These achievements are prefaced by "all in all" which signals both the summary nature of the comment and is suggestive of thoughtfulness (all things having been considered). Clark claims that the considerable achievements (presented as a four part list) of the previous Labour Government have been overshadowed by the memory of the economic policy. This carries with it the suggestion that appraisals of Labour's previous achievements suffer from memory related distortion. Thus Labour is portrayed as a victim of the vagaries of human memory. Of the many achievements of the last Labour Government, one (economic policy) has managed to "overshadow" the others.

Interestingly, two sentences after admitting that Labour has not always delivered policies congruent with prevailing public opinion (or indeed the traditional beliefs of the Labour party) Clark suggests Labour has maintained some sort of consistency:

To the question, what does Labour stand for today, my answer is that it stands for what it has always stood for: equality of opportunity and social justice. The Labour manifesto of 1935 was based on the concept of the "first charge". The first charge on the community was to be the care of the worker, the old, the young and the sick...All those concerns are as valid and timely today as they were then. *ex. 8*

In brushing over this inconsistency in her account, Clark associates the current Labour party with its famous

antecedent, popularly recognised as implementing the modern welfare state. In stating the party "stands for what it has always stood for" Clark invokes the persuasive power of the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) and trades on the stability of an unswerving adherence to fundamental principles of egalitarianism and social justice. In suggesting the validity and timeliness of these concerns has spanned the last six decades, Clark strengthens the point: not only have they been faithful to the principles, but the principles are worth adhering to as they have withstood the test of time.

Bolger on Labour

Most notable in examining Bolger's speech is his lack of reference to the Labour party. Bolger, although in a powerful position from a political perspective, limits his speech to reiterating National's agenda. Bolger excludes the possibility of opposition by omission, and the strength of his account lies in emphasising the success and ability of the National Government.

His single reference to the Labour party marginalises the contribution of the Opposition.

These arrangements are now having an effect. You may have read in last Friday's NZ *Herald* that "administration expenditure is a good indicator of the Government's efficiency" and that "during the Labour Government's term, increasing inefficiencies were reflected in rising administration expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product."

"The National Government," it goes on to say, "has turned this trend around ever since it took office, in spite of a severe recession at the start of its first term." So the public service infrastructure to implement a plan is in place. ex. 9

The "arrangements" that allowed improvement in Government efficiency, in particular two laws (State Sector Act, 1988 and the Public Finance Act, 1989) that facilitated the restructuring of Government administration, were implemented not by the National Government, but by the preceding Labour Government towards the end of their term (Harris et al., 1988). Bolger fails to acknowledge this and uses the newspaper quote to support the view that the National Government can justifiably claim responsibility for increased efficiency.

Making reference to a metropolitan daily lends support to the credibility of these claims of success. A newspaper may be considered as reporting the "facts" in a disinterested, impartial manner. The interests of the newspaper might be regarded as less obvious than that of the politician who uses the newspaper to support claims concerning the efficacy of his own Government.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented a discursive analysis of speeches delivered by two of the key politicians in contemporary New Zealand. Consistent with the recent theoretical recognition that language plays an active, constructive role in the development of political positions (Edwards & Potter, 1992) we have focused on the particular use to which language has been employed in the speeches. In examining the detail of political discourse we have set out to show the way in which particular contrasting constructions of the two major political parties are formulated. Bolger formulates the National Party as business-like, forward oriented, efficient, focused and organised. In contrast, Clark formulates it as lacking support, disorganised, dictatorial, destructive, paralysed and power-crazed. The Labour Party is constructed by Clark as consistent, principled, responsible and caring while Bolger marginalizes Labour by omission.

These formulations employ specific discursive resources for particular purposes. Recall, for example, Bolger's description of National as having "a corporate plan". This draws on the particular resource of "business" discourse (Morgan, Tuffin, Frederikson, Lyons, & Stephens, 1994) and has the specific function of signalling the dominant theme of Bolger's address. Rhetorical devices are also used for specific purposes, for example, Clark's admission of Labour's mistakes. Her "confession" functions to present her as a fair and honest commentator. As well as these specific purposes each speaker has a broader political agenda in terms of retaining public popularity and capturing votes. What we have aimed to show is the dynamic manner in which discursive resources have been put together and the pragmatic work achieved by such constructions.

In identifying some of the discursive resources which the two speakers have utilised, this work contributes to understanding the manner in which political positions are justified and political claims are supported. Traditional psychological approaches to the study of political speeches have focused on persuasion and treated language as a transparent medium providing access to political truth. The discursive approach shifts from this perspective to a focus on dynamic constructions and social actions. The results of a discursive analysis provide resources for critical readings, which are particularly important in the political arena.

This study has provided some preliminary work in the application of discursive methodology to political speeches in one particular context. Other contextual variations which could be examined include speeches to party members (for example, speeches to the

respective party conferences), speeches to the economically powerful and influential (for example, members of the business round table or the bankers association), and televised speeches to the voting public (for example, prior to the 1996 elections). Further, it may be interesting to examine whether the changing electoral system will impact on leaders' constructions of their parties.

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