

Australian political science and the study of discourse

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Abstract

This paper argues that the study of political discourse, in its various forms and taking various approaches, has become an increasingly useful aspect of Australian political science. That development, in turn, is related to a 'discursive shift', associated with the influence of neo-liberalism, that has taken place in Australian government discourse and that has challenged previous understandings of Australian political thought. As well, the increasing study of political discourse has been influenced by the impact of interdisciplinary approaches such as post-structuralist, postmodernist, feminist, queer, critical theory and postcolonial analyses. Such analyses can generate very useful insights. However, this paper also argues that discursive approaches should be seen as merely supplementing more traditional approaches to the study of politics.

I would like to begin this paper by making it absolutely clear that, in my view, the study of discourse in Australian political science/studies merely reflects an acknowledgement that this is an important and fruitful area of research that complements other approaches to political science research. Institutional research, psephological research, quantitative survey research (including analyses of values), comparative research and a host of other approaches are also extremely valuable tools in the armoury which political scientists bring to the study of our fascinating, if somewhat vexed, discipline. Such riders should be unnecessary. However, given that there have been past debates over what the monolithic 'identity' of Australian political science and its methodology should be (Crozier 2001, 7-26), the point needs to be made that this paper is definitely not arguing that Australian political science should have a new, discursively orientated identity. Rather, it argues that Australian political science is best served by a complex, plural identity (see Crozier 2001, 22) and that the study of discourse has useful contributions to make to that plurality.

Discourse is being used in this paper in a very broad sense to include not only rationalities of governance, (including practices and techniques) but also ideas and political debate. This concept of discourse therefore intersects with, and draws on, some concepts of ideology that would be anathema to, for example, a pure Foucauldian approach to discourse.¹ So, it is in the broader sense, incorporating analysis of beliefs, meanings and ideas, as well as practices and techniques, that I'll be discussing the 'discursive' here.² Meanwhile, 'ideology' will be predominantly used here, not in a sense that assumes a negative meaning e.g. 'false consciousness', but in a traditional political science sense that sees bodies of thought and belief, ranging from marxism and feminism to varieties of liberalism as 'ideologies' (see further Vincent, 1992, 16; Leach 1988).³ The broad concepts of discourse and ideology used here allow the inclusion of work coming from a range of perspectives. It is also arguably beneficial to draw on insights and analytical tools from a variety of positions (Johnson 2000). Nonetheless, the paper does focus more on research that actually uses the concepts of 'ideology' or 'discourse' rather than alternative concepts, for example, political culture.⁴ Finally, this paper does not claim to be providing a complete or exhaustive account of the study of discourse in Australian political science (unfortunately, I'm not qualified to comment on New Zealand political science). That

would not be possible in a paper of this length. Rather, it attempts to identify some key areas where the study of discourse can make some useful contributions to our understanding of Australian politics.⁵

The interest in studying discourse also draws on the view that social and political theory has a very useful role to play in helping to explain the practice of politics – a view that the empirical and theoretical are intertwined. This is a tradition that is a very old one in Australian political science, going back to founding figures such as P.H. Partridge – who, incidentally, had worked with Karl Mannheim, a major theorist of ideology (Crozier 2001, 20). Indeed that is one reason why discursive analyses have always recognised the importance of the interaction between theory and empirical research. They also draw on the view that politics is about power in the broadest sense from government to everyday life. The influence of theory is important since developments in Australian political science have been taking place in a context of developments in international political and social theory which emphasise the need to analyse not just forms of deliberative or discursive democracy (Dryzek 2000); governmentality (Gane and Johnson 1993); but also the gendered (Okin 1979), colonial, racist (Parekh 1995) and heteronormative (Phelan 2001; Blasius 2000) nature of political discourse – and sometimes of political science itself (see e.g. Pateman 1982). In short, and rather as one would expect, the interest in ideology and discourse in Australian political science often reflects the influence of a complex combination of developments in Australian political debate, factors such as the impact of various social movements, and developments in international political, social and cultural theory.

Nonetheless, historically there has been some resistance to studying ideology and discourse in Australian politics, despite productive analyses of Australian liberal ideology (e.g. Brugger and Jaensch 1985) and the ideology of political parties (e.g. Simms 1982).⁶ In particular, some proponents of the ‘Australian political thought’ debate tended to see Australian political thought as essentially ‘pragmatic’ rather than ‘ideological’ (see e.g. Loveday 1979, 2, 23).⁷ Since this paper is predominantly about contemporary contributions, it is not appropriate to cover those arguments in detail here (although see Stokes 1994; Johnson 2000, 10-11). However, this paper will argue that one reason such arguments are less common now is because of Australian political scientists’ need to analyse the influence of neo-liberalism on Australian political debate, whether in its economic-rationalist Labor form or in the form currently espoused by the Liberal government. Howard’s melding of neo-liberal economics with forms of social conservatism has further emphasised the need to analyse the influence of ideas, beliefs and changing rationalities of government. Just as Keating mobilised various ideas about social inclusion and changing national identity in his electoral politics, so has Howard

electorally mobilised socially conservative ideas about 'mainstream' Australia, gender, race, ethnicity and security (Burke 2001, 322-330; Ahluwalia and McCarthy 1998; Rolfe 1999; Johnson 1997 and 2000). In short, Australian electoral politics has had its own, very lively, culture wars. After all, Howard himself asserts 'that in the end politics is a battle of ideas and a battle of commitment' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2-21 July 2002).

However, it was arguably the impact of neo-liberalism that most re-generated an interest in ideas and beliefs amongst political scientists working in the institutional and policy area. (Obviously, political scientists working in areas such as opinion polling had always been interested in beliefs, although not necessarily in analysing them in terms of ideology and discourse). Martin Painter pointed out in his 1995 APSA Presidential Address that 'the rise of market liberalism not only took most political scientists very much by surprise, but also caught them unprepared theoretically and analytically' (Painter 1996, 287). After all, as late as 1985, in his sometimes very perceptive study of Australian liberalism, Hugh Collins had argued that 'Australia is a large grievance to latter day disciples of laissez-faire economics.... If their rhetoric is useful to a defensive liberalism, their prescriptions are implausible for any party in office (Collins 1985, 158).' However useful his insights on other issues, on this point Collins was definitely mistaken. The increasing influence of neo-liberalism therefore made Australian political scientists who were adherents to the 'pragmatic' conception of Australian political ideas, more open to taking analyses of discourse, rationalities and ideologies seriously, not least because of economic rationalism's highly contested claims that it was itself both pragmatic and non-ideological. Consequently, the advent of neo-liberalism, albeit initially in its mitigated, social democratic, economic rationalist form, undermined conceptions that Australian liberalism was purely pragmatic in a self-evident sense and therefore did not require sophisticated study either as an ideology or as a discursive rationality for government. Australian politics textbooks began to include quite detailed analyses of changes in Australian liberal thought as forms of welfare or social liberalism began to lose out to forms of neo-liberalism (e.g. Emy and Hughes 1991; Brett 1994). At the same time, the historical moment reinforced the alternative views of those participants in the Australian political thought debate, such as James Walter, that ideas did indeed play an important role in Australian political debate (Walter 1988). Consequently, chapter three of his 1996 book, *Tunnel Vision: The Failure of Political Imagination* is devoted precisely to analysing why neo-liberal ideas are now so influential (Walter 1996: 27-35).

This historical moment of change in Australian political discourse facilitated many different forms of analysis, ranging from sociologist Michael Pusey's *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, (1991) to cultural studies' theorist Meaghan Morris's *Ecstasy and Economics*, (1992). The impact of neo-liberalism, in the form of economic rationalism, on the Labor

Party also gave rise to a political science debate regarding the relationship between Hawke/Keating and traditional Labor that often touched on issues of ideology (Jaensch 1989; Maddox 1989; Johnson 1989; Maddox and Battin 1991; Johnson 1991; Kuhn 1992). More recently, analyses of neo-liberalism and economic rationalism have also focused on their relationship with discourses of globalisation and their challenges to Australian political culture (e.g. Capling et al 1998, 4, 12-14, 109-111, 131-134).

Marian Sawer (1982), who had edited a collection on the New Right ideology twenty years ago, emphasised economic rationalism's impact on government policy and ideology in her feminist book *Sisters in Suits* (Sawer 1990). Indeed, one needs to acknowledge the impact of feminist political scientists, whose familiarity with feminist critiques of androcentric/'patriarchal' thought, including mainstream political debate and political theory (Okin 1979; Pateman 1982), had made them well aware of the crucial importance of studying ideology and discourse from the seventies on (e.g. Sawer and Simms 1984, passim). However, given that the contribution of feminism is being analysed in another paper in this session, the paper won't discuss this aspect in detail, except to point out that feminists were already well positioned to analyse issues ranging from gender in the Howard government's discourse (e.g. Sawer 1997) to the construction of political categories and affirmative action debates (e.g. Bacchi 1996) and political discourse regarding a range of social issues, including pornography and prostitution (e.g. Sullivan 1997).

The most lengthy analysis of economic rationalism that drew explicitly on a theoretical framework was sociologist Michael Pusey's (1991) Habermasian influenced analysis of economic rationalism in the Canberra bureaucracy. Since Pusey is a sociologist, his work will not be discussed in detail here (but see Johnson 2000, 111-122).⁸ However, a major theme of his work is the view that economic rationalism is distorting Australian political communication by privileging the market and the economic over the social and cultural (Pusey 1990, 179). A Habermasian influence (albeit with significant reservations) is also evident in discussions of deliberative democracy by political scientists such as John Dryzek (2000, 21-9, 170) and John Uhr (1998, 7-9), especially in their concern to improve the quality of democratic discourse. While Uhr's work focuses more on institutional issues, Dryzek's (2000) work involves a critique of the constraints which factors ranging from transnational capitalist political economy to anthropocentric arrogance towards nature, pose to achieving desirable forms of discursive democracy.

So far I've been discussing the issues largely in terms of analysing ideas, beliefs and political debate. This is important because, while acknowledging that politicians can use opinion polling to determine election policy; that politicians and their media minders are

masters of spin; that one can never assume that politicians tell the electorate their true beliefs, it is also necessary to acknowledge that ideas and beliefs can influence politicians' policies and the advice given by bureaucrats. In particular, it is necessary to acknowledge that ideas and beliefs can influence politicians' (and bureaucrats) perceptions of what the outcomes of particular policies will be; of which policies will fix perceived economic and social problems and of which policies will therefore prove popular with the electorate. For example, would the Hawke and Keating governments have embraced economic rationalism quite so fervently if they hadn't believed that deregulation, free trade, real wage cuts and cuts to government services would make Australia's economy more internationally competitive and therefore contribute to higher standards of living for all? Would they have embraced economic rationalism quite so fervently if they'd known that ALP reports would partly blame the impact of economic rationalism on Labor's heartland for their 1996 election defeat (ALP 1996, ALP (NSW) 1996)? Would they have embraced it quite so fervently if they'd known that Kim Beazley would be forced to claim he'd listened to the electorate and eaten 'humble pie' on economic and social issues in the 1998 election, or if they'd known that he'd be forced to admit that reducing wages was not a desirable strategy (Howard, Beazley and Martin 1998, Beazley 1999)? Similarly, however skilful the Coalition's election campaigns have been, can we just conceive Howard's electoral mobilisation of social conservatism as poll-driven, when his socially conservative core values have been remarkably consistent throughout his political life. After all, 1980's policy documents such as *Future Directions* could, in many respects, be seen as a blueprint for the Howard Government.

However, as well as acknowledging the role of ideas and beliefs, it is also necessary to analyse a somewhat different approach. Foucauldian approaches to discourse tend to put their emphasis on studying techniques and rationalities of government rather than ideas and beliefs. Within Australian political science that approach is most associated with the work of Barry Hindess. (As Professor of Political Science in the Research School of Social Science, ANU, Hindess has also encouraged research on Australian political science and ideology that draws on a variety of non-Foucauldian approaches, including work that draws on Habermasian, postmodern, feminist and social liberal approaches). Hindess's own neo-Foucauldian approach to analysing discourse is perhaps best illustrated by a quotation from his book *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* when he says that for Foucault 'power is seen as a matter of the instruments, techniques and procedures employed in the attempt to influence the actions of those who have a choice about how they might behave' (Hindess 1996, 141). British sociologist Nikolas Rose (a visitor to the RSSH Political Science Program) has summed up some of the implications for neo-liberal forms of governance when he writes that advanced liberal rule seeks to govern 'through the regulated choices of individual citizens. And it seeks to detach the substantive

authority of expertise from the apparatuses of political rule, relocating experts within a market governed by the rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand (Rose 1993, 285)'. Mark Considine (another visitor to the Political Science Program) rightly points out that one wouldn't want to reduce the complexities of neo-liberal governance to such prescriptions (Considine 2001, 167). However, few readers of John Howard's speeches could deny the importance he places on claims that government should facilitate choice (Howard 1995, 12), whether over choice of education, health or employment service providers, or in the case of work and family arrangements. Analysing the techniques and rationalities that help to shape those choices whether in crude forms such as tax incentives for single income families or by instituting more sophisticated rationalities of consumer choice, e.g. through corporatising or contracting out government services, can provide some very useful insights.

For example, Mitchell Dean, a sociologist but another frequent visitor to the RISS Political Science Program, has analysed the way in which contracting out and other measures have encouraged the unemployed to develop 'capacities of rational choice as consumers within a market' (Dean 1998, 92). The changes in provision of employment services are just one further example of a general trend towards extending the scope of market relations that has been noted by Barry Hindess:

in what is often seen as an 'economic rationalist' or 'neo-liberal' attack on the welfare state, the concern is not simply to save money but also to promote more efficient patterns of individual and organisational behaviours by bringing market relationships into what had been regarded as non-market spheres of allocation (Hindess 1998, 223).

What such analyses also stress is that current changes in the role of the state are not between a more and less interventionist state but about a state that is intervening in different and sometimes, far more sophisticated ways. In short, analyses of discourse can contribute useful insights into how the state operates.

More recently, and often in his work done jointly with anthropologist Christine Helliwell, Hindess's work has tended to focus on authoritarian aspects of liberal governance. It is here that his work also reveals new influences such as postcolonial theory. Indeed, Hindess has partly been reworking his analysis of liberalism in the west through understandings generated by analyses of authoritarian liberal rule in colonies. While Hindess has tended not to relate his more recent work specifically to Australian examples, one could argue that his work does have particular relevance to the Australian situation. When Hindess re-explores Ranajit Guha's work on the anxieties of liberal colonisers applying authoritarian rule to those considered incapable of acting in a suitably

autonomous fashion (Hindess 2001, 363-377), or when Hindess and Helliwell criticise authoritarian elitism in the colonial context (Helliwell and Hindess 2002), it has clear relevance for the ongoing dilemmas and anxieties of governance in colonial settler societies such as our own. We may be in a different form of colonial society in a different historical period, but one is reminded of the particular forms of anxiety revealed by the denial of the Stolen Generations, or the arguably authoritarian paternalism of Howard's 'practical reconciliation'. More generally work on authoritarian liberal discourse and the governance of populations has implications for the treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees.

The influence of postcolonial insights on Hindess's more recent work, also mirrors a more general influence in Australian political science, namely a growing recognition of the issues involved in colonial discourse and discourse about race (e.g. Leach et al 2000; Grant 1997).⁹ The Howard government's position on issues ranging from Native Title and Reconciliation to Asylum-seekers, combined with the impact of Hansonism, have ensured that such issues have remained of importance for Australian political scientists. There have been also been a number of other analyses that have drawn heavily on discourse analyses of constructions of the 'other' (McMaster 2001, 1-7, 38-65, 189-191 or of conceptions of 'security' (Burke 2001, xxx-xxxiii). There has also been work that involves an impassioned critique of socially conservative discourse on race, even if it does not draw on more theoretical tools derived from study of discourse and ideology. Robert Manne's Quarterly Essay, *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right* is an example of such work (Manne 2001). Indeed socially conservative discourse on race has also been analysed using a variety of other tools, for example, opinion poll analysis (Goot 1998; Goot and Watson 2001).

In short, Australian political scientists have taken a commendably eclectic approach to analysing issues of ideology and discourse. Arguably such eclecticism is a strength, rather than a weakness, generating a range of insights that might otherwise be missed (Johnson 2000: 145-155). However, as stated at the beginning of this paper, one needs to recognise the crucial importance of other forms of analysis. Perhaps an example would help here. An election is a perfect example of how political scientists taking different approaches need to work together. How could we understand the outcome of an election without detailed psephological research? How could we understand it without a study of electoral methods, of the party system or without a historical understanding of, for example, the way the composition of the Senate was shaped by the need to reassure the smaller colonies prior to federation? Who could fully understand voter attitudes without quantitative election surveys? Who could understand the emphasis on strong leadership without an analysis of the gendered forms it took? Who could fully understand the possibilities and

limitations of the political debate without an analysis of deliberative democracy? How could one fully understand what was happening without some overseas comparisons, for example with British conservative and labour election strategies? The list is enormous of the potential forms of expertise and area focuses within our discipline that can, and will, contribute to an understanding of what happened.

What could be the contribution of analyses of discourse? There are numerous forms it could take but let's mention just a few. Let's start with a crucial 2001 election slogan. Final election advertisements highlighted John Howard's Campaign Launch slogan: 'We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' and claimed that a vote for the Liberals 'protects our borders' (*Advertiser*, 9 November 2001). Now just how influential this issue was is open to debate, however, it seems disingenuous to argue, given its prominence in the last days of the campaign, that it didn't play some role. The 'we' was ambiguous enough to be understood broadly enough, according to liberal polling (*The Australian*, 21 November 2001), to attract immigrants from all ethnic backgrounds, anxious to assert that they were the legitimate, the desired immigrants. But the 'we' could also be interpreted sufficiently narrowly to attract the racist Hansonite vote as well. The construction of 'we', 'our' and the unarticulated 'other' is of course a classic issue discussed in analyses of discourses of identity and security (McMaster 2001 and Burke 2001). The discursive construction of 'Islam' and 'terrorism' is obviously relevant too. One could also develop cultural theorist's McKenzie Wark's analysis of how the conservative side of politics, in this case through its argument regarding queue jumping, has once again captured the conception of the 'fair go'.¹⁰ But this is also a debate highly relevant to Foucauldian work on the governance of populations and to Foucauldian work on how policy 'problems', e.g. in this case a 'refugee crisis' are constructed in the rationalities of government. The use of mandatory detention, the role of the SAS and navy also suggest that a form of authoritarian liberal discourse is at work (as does recent anti-terrorism legislation). In short, there are numerous points at which analyses of discourse might be relevant.

Conclusion

One should not over-emphasise the impact of forms of analysing discourse on Australian political science. I would not like to suggest for example, that one now readily finds sophisticated analyses of discourse in Australian politics textbooks, or even that we would find lengthy sections on discourse in Australian political theory textbooks (if Australian

publishers still published them). Similarly, analyses of Australian political discourse often draw heavily on the work of sociologists or cultural studies theorists (Johnson 2000) and many commentators in political science departments have an interdisciplinary background themselves (e.g. Barry Hindess). Nor would one want to suggest that the increasing prevalence of discourse-related analyses is just due to the influence of 'external' factors such as the influence of neo-liberalism or the playing of the 'race card' in electoral politics. After all, one could ask why Keynesian economics or the White Australia policy didn't generate analyses, of them as ideology, by previous generations of Australian political scientists. Clearly there are a large range of factors at work here including the influence of wider theoretical debates, the ability of existing analytical frameworks to explain changes taking place, the impact of social movements, the de-stabilising of the western, white, male, heterosexual citizen subject, and last, but certainly not least, the ideological predispositions of the Australian political science profession itself. The latter is an interesting and controversial issue in a profession that sometimes claims not just conscientious scholarship but also neutral objectivity. Nonetheless, one could speculate that many members of a profession devoted to studying politics and government might be disposed to question an ideology that apparently privileges markets over government. Consequently, this may make it easier for some political scientists to recognise neo-liberalism as an ideology than more Keynesian forms of social liberalism (assuming one uses a non-negative definition of ideology). There therefore seem to be numerous, and highly complex, factors at work. Whatever the causes, analyses of ideology and discourse now seem to share an honourable place in Australian political science.

Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ Foucault argued that concepts of ideology necessarily involved a conception of 'false consciousness' and therefore an opposing regime of truth (Rabinow 1986, 60).

² 'Discourse theorists argue that meaning is not simply given, but is socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and practices. Hence, discourse theorists emphasize the material and heterogeneous nature of discourse. For Foucault and others, an important concern of discourse theory is to analyse the institutional bases of discourse, the viewpoints and positions from which people speak, and the power relations these allow and presuppose. Discourse theory also interprets discourse as a site and object of struggle where different groups strive for hegemony and the production of meaning and ideology (Best and Kellner 1991, 26).'

³ However, it should be noted that Australian political science has used a variety of concepts of ideology (Stokes 1994, 244-255; Johnson 2000, 8-13).

⁴ There is very useful work on Australian Political Culture, e.g. Rodney Smith's (2001) recent textbook, that doesn't draw on forms of discourse analysis. For previous analyses see e.g. Mayer (1973: 103-149). For a critique of Keating's attempts to reshape Australian Culture (conceived in terms of 'packages') see Melleuish 1998.

⁵ Obviously Australian political science extends far beyond the study of Australian politics. I merely use that (narrow) focus as a particularly useful way of drawing out key features of specifically Australian work. Unfortunately, that means I have had to leave out some important contributions in e.g. political theory, international relations and comparative politics. As well, this paper was initially commissioned as a contribution to the Political Science Program Jubilee Workshop, RSCS, ANU, 30 November 2001, so focused on the history of that program. My apologies if the latest version might seem to over-emphasise the contributions of that Program as a result. I look forward to receiving feedback regarding any contributions from other departments which I have overlooked, when I present the paper. [Later author's note – omissions pointed out when the paper was presented include the important work of A.F. Davies (see e.g. Davies 1972) and Michael Dutton (see e.g. Dutton 1998). This paper was also submitted before the launch of Greg McCarthy's (2002) innovative analysis of South Australian government and commercial discourse in his history of the State Bank of S.A.].

⁶ There were also important sociological contributions such as Rowse (1978)

⁷ Re-reading those old debates, it is clear that 'ideology' was predominately considered in terms which did not recognise issues of gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality.

⁸ There are also other, notable sociological omissions, particularly the work of Anna Yeatman (1994).

⁹ For the work of another Australian political scientist working on post-colonial discourse see Ahluwalia (2001). For analyses of the politics of Australian identity see Stokes (1997).

¹⁰ See further Wark (1999, 21).