



# Limp language masks a tough budget

By Neil James

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***The budget speech could have been open about the need to break promises, but instead it evaded the issue through soft euphemism and weasel words, writes Neil James.***

It's no surprise the Treasurer is having some awkward moments selling his Budget. A quick look at the language reveals little that is likely to persuade.

The 2014 budget speech contrasts strongly with the aggressive language the Government used in the lead-up to the last election. None of the attack verbs are there, even though the 'Economic Action Plan' certainly does plenty to cut, stop, end, pay and scrap.

Instead, we have the softening language of euphemism. The keyword is 'contribution', highlighted at the outset in a riff on 'if we all contribute now'. This neatly switches the focus from the government's negative cuts and taxes to the softer sounding 'modest contributions' we will all be making.

Only slightly less mild were the metaphors around lifting. The corporate sector, we were told, will be doing the 'heavy' lifting, although Hockey clarified to ABC's 7.30 that 'heavy lifting comes down to individuals' because the corporate sector is merely a vehicle that represents us as individuals. And as a nation of individuals we are 'lifters not leaners'.

This is hardly in the rank of the most memorable budget language. There is no killer line to distil the Government's message in the way that a Keating could 'bring home the bacon' or a Costello could defend 'tough but fair' measures to fix a 'budget black hole'.

Hockey uses few metaphors throughout the speech, and they're mostly clichés about firing up, being watersheds, targeting assistance, repairing budgets, setting sights, moving shovels and stopping bucks. The speech's climax of 'everyone making a contribution now' is not going to end up in anyone's dictionary of quotations.

To his credit, the Treasurer had a go at lifting the speech with some Obama-style rhetorical sentences. There were some neat contrasting parallels such as: 'not with an age of austerity, but with an age of opportunity' and '... this Budget is not about self interest. This Budget is about the national interest'. And he delivered them well on the night.

These devices work best when backed by persuasive argument, supported in a clear chain of reasoning and evidence. Yet the arguments Hockey offers are revealingly narrow.

When you break down the logic, the Treasurer's most common type of argument is an appeal to principle. We are a great country, he says, so we must face the facts together in the national interest and exert our fair share of personal effort so that we do not leave our children worse off because that's not fair and that's not our way.

Principle arguments can be effective, but they operate at a level of assertion, appealing to underlying community values rather than the cold logic of reason.

Principle arguments are also easy to counter. We could equally argue, for example, that it is neither fair nor the Australian way to ask our most vulnerable individuals to 'contribute' so much of the 'heavy lifting'.

This is why principle arguments are best used in a supporting role to more robust arguments of consequence, comparison and example.

Of course, comparison and example arguments would have been hard to mount given Australia's 'debt and deficit' crisis actually compares favourably to most OECD countries. While there was a clear consequence argument surrounding the 'pain now for prosperity later', this was asserted more than reasoned in the budget speech.

Instead, the most lasting lines of the 2014 Budget are likely to be the weasel words. It's no surprise they emerge to soften the core problem Hockey has with his sales pitch: the taxes.

We had a hint of this well before the election, when funding for the paid parental leave scheme tax was spun as 'an investment in human capital' rather than a 'new tax'. Now in Budget 2014, we apparently don't have an increase in income tax: it's a 'Temporary Budget Repair Levy'. Among the 'modest contributions' we will make are a 'Fuel Excise Indexation Adjustment' and a 'Medicare Co-payment'.

A tax is a tax is a tax. These weasel names play down the broken promises that there would be 'no new taxes' from a no-surprises, grown-up Government that says what it means and means what it says.

The budget speech could have tackled this head on and been open about the need to break these promises rather than evading the issue through soft euphemism and weasel words. Instead, we are served up sophistry such as the Coalition keeping its 'most significant' or 'solemn' promises and not wanting to 'spend the whole conversation talking about the process of promises'.

It is clear that the Government is in a bind. Having come into office relentlessly pursuing the previous prime minister over a broken promise, it is hard-pressed to own up to its own. So the Budget instead offers a limp language that contrasts clearly with the tough measures it is actually introducing.

It was always going to be a hard sell.

*Dr Neil James is executive director of the Plain English Foundation and the author of Writing at Work. View his full profile here.*

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