



Shorten's rhetorical rampage fails to convince

By Neil James

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Bill Shorten's budget reply was soft on argument but full of extreme adjectives. If he can tone down the rhetoric he may truly find a voice worthy of applause at the ballot box, writes Neil James.

Bill Shorten informed the Labor faithful on the weekend that their party had rediscovered its voice. On the evidence so far, this appears to be a voice of hyperbole.

In contrast to the Treasurer's euphemistic spin of "making a contribution", the Opposition Leader's budget reply was full of flailing adjectives.

Shorten was "shocked and angry" at a "cowardly, wicked, punitive, capricious, brutal, cruel, extreme, unconscionable, victim-blaming" budget that was lacking "humanity" and full of "lies, lectures and surprises".

The Government, he says, has "betrayed and divided" Australians and will create a "colder, meaner, narrower" country.

Punitive and extreme? Perhaps. Capricious and unconscionable? Arguable. Wanton and wicked? Not by my dictionary. Lacking in "humanity"? Sorry, that's just straining the voice.

Of course, the logic of the language is hardly the point. Shorten is working straight from the Prime Minister's own political playbook. Tony Abbott marched into government under a relentless hail of attack verbs about cutting, scrapping, stopping and ending. It's no surprise that Shorten is returning the linguistic favour.

His sentences were carefully crafted to strengthen the song. The speech's main feature was a rhetorical device called anaphora, which repeats a word or phrase at the start of a series of clauses. Shorten used this device about a

dozen times throughout the speech.

The budget "offers no hope. It offers despair. It offers poverty". "It forgot opportunity. It forgot reward for effort. It forgot the fair go."

Labor, by contrast, stands for "An Australia that still makes things. An Australia with quality infrastructure ... an Australia where women are equal ... an Australia ready for the future, optimistic about the future and investing in the future."

When he wasn't speaking in anaphora, Shorten turned to the mirror device of epistrophe, which repeats a word or phrase at the end of a series of clauses.

He rewrote Hockey's riff that "we all contribute now" into a verse on paying more: "If you need to see a doctor, *you will pay more*. If you need to buy medicine, *you will pay more*. If you go to work and earn a good wage, *you will pay more*."

He then developed the device in a chorus of "you will be left behind ... you will be punished ... you were betrayed."

The rhetoric certainly stirred the Labor faithful in the parliamentary galleries, who applauded throughout the 30-minute set. And in some ways, this new Labor voice is a welcome relief to the stilted speech of our recent prime ministers.

But by including some heated personal attacks, the Opposition Leader's hyperbole took a nasty turn we can do without. Not only, he told us, is the Treasurer "incompetent", but he is a "foghorn leghorn", a "low-rent toe-cutter" and a "blackmailing coward" who delivered a "budget of broken promises built on lies".

In the world of logic, this is clearly an ad hominem argument and it is a rank fallacy. Unfortunately, the Government can't complain too much about it, given that it inflicted or supported similar treatment on Julia Gillard in particular. But let's hope this is a short-lived theme on Labor's song sheet.

The reply speech was stronger when it used real arguments, mostly of consequence, comparison and example.

The Opposition was spoiled for choice in highlighting the many negative consequences of the Coalition's budget. But a litany of woe doesn't always make an effective speech. Shorten used examples to good effect, such as that of a real Queanbeyan family.

This helped to bring the dry numbers of NATSEM modeling to life through the concrete world of the family car, Saturday sports and the bills in the letterbox.

He used the example of education as a pathway in his own life and how his mum had inspired him.

Shorten contrasted these examples with a Coalition Government that sees "the Australian people not as workers, parents, patients or commuters but as economic units unentitled to respect". Who promised "one thing before an election while doing something completely different after."

Who "think that it's OK to pay multi-millionaires \$50,000 that they don't need. And yet rob the retirement savings of over two million women who earn less than that in a whole year."

Arguments of this kind are far more likely to translate into votes than the extreme adjectives and the fancy sentence schemes. If Labor can tone down the hyperbole and focus on the argument, it may truly find a voice worthy of applause at the ballot box.

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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