

The revealing language of a cut-and-axe leader

By Neil James

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott might have more verbal clarity than his immediate predecessors, but he too could find his language coming back to bite him if his stopping and scrapping doesn't actually deliver, writes Neil James.

A prime minister's language has always been a useful barometer of the national political weather. So six months into an Abbott Government, what does his language foretell about our future climate? If his verbs are anything to go by, there'll be plenty of negative action ahead.

From the moment he became opposition leader, there have been three hallmarks of the Abbott style: attack language, verbal blunder and strategic silence.

The first feature is the hail of negative verbs. Abbott focuses on how to stop, end, scrap, cut, and turn back Labor policy. True, there was a token attempt at the sunny verb "to build" during the last election. But in Government, the verbal weather has returned to its negative hailstones.

This is remarkably the case even when the topic is a government initiative. Here's a typical exchange from the Today show, when the Prime Minister was asked about changes to the Racial Discrimination Act:

Well Nat, let's first of all say that the main thing this Government is focussed on is making life easier for families, and that's why last week we tried to get rid of the carbon tax.

The second feature has always been Abbott's verbal blunder. The obvious examples are the ums and arrs, the meandering sentences, and the verbal slips about not being the "suppository of all wisdom".

But the more revealing slips come in those unscripted moments, where Abbott often reveals more than intended about the weather ahead. Climate change is "absolute crap" and timber workers the "ultimate conservationists"; "shit happens" when a soldier is killed; Syria is a case of "baddies versus baddies"; and we should vote for female candidates because of their "sex appeal".

It's no wonder the Prime Minister only wants us to take his "carefully prepared, scripted remarks" as the "gospel truth".

When fenced-in by media scrutiny, the Prime Minister can resort to bland assertion, such as the reasoning on why the parental leave scheme and the baby bonus are so different: "They just are." And he sprinkles his remarks with the verbal insistence of imperatives and adverbs. "Look," he demands; "obviously," he explains; "certainly," he asserts; and "you know," he insists.

The last resort is a strategic silence. This is mostly in the interviews that he doesn't do, although there was that excruciating 28-second, bobble-headed silence during a Channel Seven interview about his "shit happens" gaffe.

Since winning government, the excuse of "operational matters" is now a more common tactic to avoid a heavy-weather question. As he explained to ABC's 7.30: "I'm not interested in running a commentary on a commentary. So I'm just not going to comment on operational matters."

But if these are the hallmarks of the Abbott style, what are their implications?

Above all, a prime minister's language is important because recent experience has shown it can forecast political and policy success.

Kevin Rudd's speech, for example, had two conspicuous features: the obscure fog of policy-speak and a damp sleet of mixed metaphor. One minute he'd be explaining our relationship with China as a natural complementarity that could be developed further in the direction of some form of conceptual synthesis. Then he'd reverse engineer how the clock was ticking on climate change, and why we can't just shuffle around and hope that something falls out of the trees.

It is hardly a co-incidence that such mangled language was reflected in premature promises, thought bubbles, dysfunctional decision-making and policy on the run.

Julia Gillard showed more promise early on, with real potential for a rhetorical turn of phrase. But that was quickly inundated by a deluge of cliché, all aired in that monotone voice. The government had lost its way, Gillard intoned, so she

intended to have a conversation with the Australian people in the national interest, so that we can all canvass the best ways to work together moving forwards. What did any of it mean?

It certainly didn't guarantee a policy outcome. There was to be no carbon tax, then there was one. A surplus was guaranteed, then abandoned. We scrapped the Pacific Solution, then re-opened Manus and Nauru. There would be no NDS levy, then there was one.

Clear speaking reflects clear thinking and leads to clear action. When the language is vague or obscure, there is uncertainty about the outcome and less chance a government can maintain support when an unavoidable change blows through.

So what does Tony Abbott's style forecast about his political future? Unlike his immediate predecessors, his attack verbs and even his verbal blunders at least have the virtue of clarity. His priority is clearly to attack and undo. Brace yourself for two-and-a-half years of ending, stopping, scrapping, cutting and turning back. The grammatical objects may change but the syntax is set.

Yet that's also where the challenge will lie if Abbott is to win a second term. There seems to be little alternative if all that turning and stopping and cutting and scrapping doesn't actually deliver. As his predecessors found, the language may then become the focus for electoral discontent.

As the next election approaches, the public may indeed want some more constructive verbs and less strategic silence. Yet if the past two prime ministers are anything to go by, it is unlikely Tony Abbott's language will adapt to such change in the political weather.

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