The Language of Strategy:
A Study in Australian Prime Ministerial Rhetoric and Campaign Speechmaking, 1983-2013

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Politics

August 2018
This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship
Statement of originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

Brooke Gizzi-Stewart
Acknowledgements

To my supervisor Professor Jim Jose, thank you for coming on this journey with me. Jim’s insights and counsel since 2012 when I first asked him to supervise my Honours thesis have been instrumental in my development as a researcher and teacher. I’m so grateful that my pursuit of knowledge has provided me with a lifelong friend and mentor.

I’d like to thank my former colleagues in the Discipline of Politics and International Relations at the University of Newcastle – Dr John Tate, Dr Sara Motta, Dr Tod Moore and Dr Rob Imre for their diverse contributions in the early stages of my research.

To my post-grad cohort, thanks for the endless coffees and intrinsic comradery that comes with shared experiences.

To the undergraduate students that I had the absolute pleasure of teaching over the years, thank you for asking the right questions and for always leaving me with that buzz that comes from teaching and learning simultaneously.

Thank you to the Australian Prime Ministers Centre at Old Parliament House for supporting my research during a critical phase, and for the rare opportunity to make a very small contribution to a very important educational project.

Thank you to my many friends over the years who let me talk their ear off about Aristotle, and to my family for their easy-going encouragement during rough patches.

And of course Haydn, for his unwavering support and for being the best sounding board anyone could ask for. Thank you for enduring the late nights and lost weekends.

Finally, to the speechwriters whose pens craft the story of our nation, thank you for feeding my infatuation with words.
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Abstract

What makes a political speech persuasive? Which approaches can be used to understand the mechanisms of strategic language in political speechmaking, and determine their influence? Political actors in all political systems from despots to democrats use political rhetoric in many aspects of their role. These rhetorical activities are so central to the way we understand politics that they have become an integral part of the way we are governed. Since politics involves the contest of ideas, beliefs and meanings, analysis should focus on argumentation—the original site of rhetorical theory and practice.

Drawing on the classical rhetorical tradition and contemporary rhetorical theory, this thesis examines a little studied area of the Australian political process: political speechmaking. The purpose is to explore the function of rhetoric in contemporary Australian political speechmaking by analysing the full transcripts of 16 Australian federal election campaign speeches across a thirty year period: 1983-2013. The thesis develops an original methodological approach to analyse these speeches. It combines a modified version of Alan Finlayson’s rhetorical political analysis with the use of text analysis software Leximancer. Using this method to analyse the campaign launch speeches by the prime minister and, during shifts of incumbency, those of the opposition leader, the thesis identifies the strategic use of rhetorical techniques by examining rhetorical appeals, argumentation structure and narratives. These techniques point to a ‘language of strategy’ unique to each study period.

The term ‘language of strategy’ captures the sustained and longitudinal use of a rhetorical method and style, in particular the overarching tone and form of the rhetorical arguments and language expressed across the set piece speeches in the study periods. The language of strategy confirms patterns of persuasive language relating to prime ministers and electoral
success, demonstrating a link between arguments that appeal to three core persuasive narratives and successful bids for national leadership: the nation-building argument, articulating a vision, and building ethos through values. Similarly, the thesis findings indicate persuasive language trends associated with changes of incumbency, particularly in how successful opposition leaders harness the rhetoric of opportunism to frame change in positive terms.

The analysis of the language of strategy presented in this thesis also reveals broader cultural, historical and behavioural aspects specific to the study periods, political environment and political leadership and is a formative line of enquiry for other scholars of rhetorical political speech analysis. By undertaking a textual analysis of rhetorical speech during these fundamental moments of democracy, the thesis demonstrates how the words of political leaders are fashioned into electoral weapons to affect political outcomes, and in particular how this language of strategy frames a rhetorical path to electoral legitimacy.