

## Selecting the Case Studies: Six Australian Public Leaders

**Abstract** Australia first emerged as relevant for studies of modern democracy in James Bryce's *Modern Democracies*. Bryce promoted empirical studies of leadership rhetoric, interested especially in the comparatively advanced democratic case of Australian political leadership. Our selection of six cases provide sketches of a group of powerful leaders, each of which has at some time been forced to speak out in defence of their public legitimacy as a political and public leader. The set includes four prime ministers: Tony Abbott; Malcolm Turnbull; Julia Gillard; and Kevin Rudd; one foreign minister, Bob Carr; and one civil society leader, Noel Pearson.

**Keywords** James Bryce · Demagogues · Australian political system

The general model of leadership performance used in this book comes from British parliamentary history. Francis Bacon's role as a theorist of political rhetoric seems quite distant from recent Australian parliamentary history, so we will not be surprised if many readers think that we have brought together a misfit of theory and practice. The previous chapter attempted to place Bacon's framework in the field of contemporary studies of leadership by minimising many of the historical details of Bacon's personal world of parliamentary politics. It is feasible, we think, for readers to be open to using Bacon's general framework to interpret political rhetoric in recent British parliamentary politics. Our

case study application is not all that far removed from such a proposal, because Australian parliamentary politics is often seen as one of a number of examples of Westminster-derived politics—Canada, New Zealand, Scotland, Ireland—worth comparing with the original British model of Westminster politics. Sure enough, current British politics is a modernised version of Westminster, with many institutional and cultural developments often at variance from other Westminster-derived systems.

### SELECTING AUSTRALIA

Our interest in including Australian examples in our study of leadership performance is in keeping with that remarkably inclusive study of comparative politics begun by former British Cabinet minister and academic James Bryce who included Australia as one of his core case studies in his pioneering book *Modern Democracies* (Bryce 1921, esp. vol. 2, 181–290). John Uhr has used Bryce in a number of studies in comparative politics, examining especially Bryce’s endless curiosity about the democratic character of politics in Australia where so few of the institutional or indeed cultural checks and balances found in Britain moderated the enthusiasm for expressions of democracy (Uhr 2005, 50–54, 73–78; 2009). Bryce’s studies of Australian models of political leadership remain outstanding examples of the interest of international political science in the rough and tumble of Australian practices of parliamentary democracy where so few restrictions tempered the power of democratic party leaders to reduce leadership to something very much like democratic populism.

Bryce was a former Cabinet minister and member of the House of Commons with a keen interest in the quality of political rhetoric, which he found puzzling in Australia, especially when visiting the country during the period of the Fisher government (1910–1913) which was the first elected Labor government in the world. What puzzled Bryce was the relative calmness of the political rhetoric of the Labor party’s parliamentary leaders compared to the partisan ferocity of the rhetoric favoured by Labor’s organisational or extra-parliamentary leaders (Bryce 1921, vol. 2, 281–282). Bryce researched this curious situation where a very reformist new political party came to parliamentary power through an elected public mandate, yet somehow moderated its partisanship in order to accommodate or even promote an *ethos* or norm of responsible parliamentary deliberation: perhaps building rather than reinforcing parliamentary and public deliberation. Bryce wondered why a reformist

party would bother to restrain its own partisan wilfulness. His answer related to the careful and almost studiously deliberate political rhetoric shaped by Fisher as Australia's first elected Labor prime minister who wanted his party accepted as a party of government as distinct from a party of opposition.

If Australia was good enough for Bryce's pioneering study of comparative democracy, then we think we have some solid evidence to support our own use of Australian politics in this study of leadership performance. Bryce saw Australia as 'a Typical Democracy', with a formal written Constitution placing very few obstacles in the way of 'unlimited rule of the multitude' (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 181). His contemporary reports described a political system promoting explicit forms of party government—so extreme that the political class later reformed the rules of parliamentary representation through preferential voting in both houses and proportional representation in the Senate. Bryce saw Labor's progressivism as a natural fit for the Australian political regime, noting that the non-Labor parties contribute 'little either to the practice or theory of statesmanship' (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 270). As a new country with 'singularly little idealism in politics', Australia managed to devise a form of parliamentary politics free from both the virtue of idealism but also the vice of corruption (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 281, 285).

Bryce formulated a theory of elite democracy as one way of explaining the norms of responsible government complied with by elected politicians in systems of increasingly open popular power (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 597, 602–603, 632, 663). At the centre of this emerging international system of modern democracy was the mixed performance of democratic elites as system managers of this type of political system. By mixed performance, we follow Bryce's carefully reasoned account of the mixed blessing of political rhetoric practised by the political class. In some cases, political leaders would promote 'the decline of legislatures' so prominently lamented by Bryce in his realistic portrait of the oligarchic tendencies hidden within systems of party government (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 367–377, 594–604; see also Bryce 1909, 92–104). Such forms of political rhetoric identified the higher responsibilities of heads of government over the traditional claims of elected legislatures to order and maintain the rights of parliament as supreme or at least foundational constitutional institutions—as 'deliberative bodies' performing 'the watchful supervision' required of political executives (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 368, 377). The alternative forms of political rhetoric favoured by Bryce defended

a different model of public leadership exercised by parliamentarians in their capacity as community representatives rather than party professionals committed to ‘an unseen despotism’ suspected by this noted international observer of modern politics (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 389).

Bryce was an astute student of ‘the Ruling Few’ who carry the responsibilities of political leadership and who perform ‘the power of persuasive speech’ (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 601). Ruling power is always exercised by ‘a few’, even in avowedly democratic regimes. Only a few possess ‘wisdom and an unselfishness’ required of those ‘strong leaders’ who deserve to rule (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 604). In his influential chapter on ‘leadership in a democracy’, Bryce sketched a model of ‘the Few’ in political leadership he considered as central to the study of comparative democratic politics, with a prominent role for public as well as political leaders: those ‘who are most listened to by the citizens, public speakers, journalists, writers of books and pamphlets’ (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 605–617; see also Bryce 1909, 40–42). These ‘few’ are the formers of public opinion who shape the community spirit and public taste of a democracy. Democratic politics is itself shaped by the relationships between the few and the many: the many are ‘on the look-out for (those) fit to be followed’, and the few who ‘aspire to leadership’ try to ‘recommend themselves for the function’ of leadership, based on two often strongly contested qualities: first, the virtue of ‘courage’ to pursue initiatives ‘instead of following after others’, and second, the passion or skill of ‘eloquence’ which can ‘touch the imagination or fire the hearts of a popular audience’ (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 606–607).

Those few who rise to the top either have ‘industry and honesty—or the reputation of it’: in Bryce’s coolly realistic description, the few can endure themselves to the people, despite ‘perhaps concealing a lack of steadfastness or wisdom’ (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 606–607). In ways often neglected in contemporary studies of leadership, Bryce acknowledges ‘demagogues’ and their ‘captivating speech’ which can play irresponsibly on the passions of a people by raising expectations which they know they cannot really gratify. The alternative to the demagogue is the great leader who, like a Lincoln or a Gladstone, ‘may do much to create a pattern for the people of what statesmanship ought to be’ (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 615). Bryce then gives a description of the ‘doctrine’ of public leadership to which he is appealing in his own modest example of leadership: ‘Their function is to commend the best of these (“doctrines”) to the people, not waiting for demands, not seeming to be bent merely on pleasing the

people, but appealing to reason and creating the sense that each nation is not a mere aggregate of classes, each seeking its own interests, but a great organized whole with a life rooted in the past and stretching on into the illimitable future' (Bryce 1921, vol. 2: 615).

## SELECTING SIX AUSTRALIAN LEADERS

Case studies of contrasting political leaders can reveal some of the typical situations which generate the many types of public rhetoric now emerging in contemporary democratic politics. The case studies in this book are snapshots of how a group of very real political and public leaders have performed their rhetorical roles. Our snapshots are useful empirical expositions of some of the virtues—and indeed some of the fascinating vices—used by public leaders when justifying what they see as their contested or debated public legitimacy. Not all the examples of public rhetoric are equally persuasive as justifications of the leaders' supposed legitimacy. Some examples are surprisingly clever instances of weakened legitimacy performed by leaders doing whatever they think it takes to bolster public confidence, regardless of the circumstances. Other examples are compellingly pitched arguments against the odds, intended to make the best case for what appears as a neglected or negligible cause—usually related to the leader's hold on public power—a leader thinks is worth saving. Our aim is to present a gallery of leadership rhetoric reflecting the fate of competing national political leaders in a contemporary democracy.

The focus on the rhetoric of leadership allows us to see what leaders want us to see. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion and many leaders try to persuade us about their legitimacy by using many different types of loose or defective evidence. 'Evidence-based leadership' is not really a useful term to describe the best forms of political leadership. Public leaders use whatever evidence they think works with their audiences: as can be seen in our case studies, leaders stretch the point quite a bit as they allow audiences to assume that supposed evidence carefully crafted by leaders justifies their claims to leadership. Dubious types of evidence can and do work to reassure many audiences, thereby encouraging some leaders to shape their rhetoric to suit the imperfect needs of their audience—even to the point of bending the evidence so that it matches the needs of their chosen audience, however limited or partial those needs might be. Regimes of representative democracy tolerate many schemes

of political rhetoric which ‘represent’ misleading information needs and reward schemes of leadership which, to their opponents and critics, seem to be examples of the depressing vice of demagogic mis-leadership rather than the alternative virtue or norm of democratic leadership.

This book uses recent Australian political experience to highlight various ways that holders of high public office perform as public leaders. Australia is a good example because it is an established parliamentary democracy with a number of important features which destabilise or challenge political leaders: such as the relatively short three-year term of the lower house of the national parliament; the surprisingly long six-year term of the Senate or elected upper house; the system of federalism which distributes parliamentary and executive power beyond the national centre of government in Canberra to six States and two territories; a formal written Constitution which can only be changed through popular referendum; a vocal indigenous community anxious about the failure of the Constitution to recognise them as ‘the original owners’; compulsory voting requirements which compel citizens to vote at each national, State or territory election; and systems of preferential and proportional representation which invite voters to register their order of preference of candidates and reward minority candidates in the Senate and State upper houses.

Recent public policy challenges have seen the Australian system of governance congested with competing demands. The war on terror has greatly centralised the power of the national government to monitor border security, with Australia taking a leading international role in supporting the US strategy of global security. Yet the war on terror has also substantially increased international demand by refugees for access to Australia as a humanitarian respite, with increased friction around Australian borders between asylum seekers and defence forces. The global financial crisis forced Australian governments to increase public expenditure to try to insulate the Australian community from the worst excesses of global recession, with Australia remaining an international exception to the dread of national recession—although the price of sustained budget insecurity grows significantly, just when the trade potential for many primary resources has fallen away dramatically.

One interesting aspect of this period of ‘troubling times’ is the instability felt by political leaders in Australian political parties. Conservative leader John Howard lost office in 2007 to Labor’s Kevin Rudd. The conservative party then went through three leaders in three years, with

Malcolm Turnbull replacing Brendan Nelson and Tony Abbott then replacing Turnbull. Prime Minister Rudd did not serve even his first three-year term, being challenged and replaced by his deputy Julia Gillard in 2010. Gillard managed to win office in 2010 against Abbott who provided fierce opposition to Gillard's term as leader of Australia's first minority government for 60 years. Gillard also faced a challenge from Rudd who returned to office as prime minister, only to lose office at the 2013 elections. Abbott became the conservative successor to John Howard, but the governing conservative party in 2015 replaced him with Turnbull who led the party as prime minister to the 2016 election, which he won by one seat in the lower house, with no majority in the Senate. Single-party majorities in the Senate have been circumvented by smaller parties including the Greens and other minority parties, like Pauline Hanson's One Nation party which won four Senate seats in 2016.

Over this recent period, many Australian political and public leaders have performed with renewed vigour as they have competed on the public stage against opponents in other parties and rivals in their own parties. This book examines six fascinating case studies in the language of legitimacy used by six important national leaders. The authors have selected unusual episodes in the public lives of these six national leaders, examining the ways each leader has used the responsibilities of high public office to reflect on the contested legitimacy of their role in national politics. The six studies are variations on a common theme, with each leader seizing on some controversial moments in national politics and public policy to elevate their reputation through unusual public rhetoric. Leadership studies internationally study public rhetoric as a core instrument of governance and public management, and these six studies provide a portrait of Australian national leaders crafting different types of public rhetoric to represent the political and policy communities with which they want to be identified.

Table 2.1 maps the case studies in this volume. They have been presented chronologically according to the events we analyse. For non-Australians and future students, Table 2.2 presents a brief chronology of the turbulent political times in Australia and their relevance to our selection of rhetors.

The Australian case studies are national instances of wider international forms of public leadership. The Abbott examined here is not the partisan of parliamentary oppositionism so commonly noted by

**Table 2.1** Rhetoric in turbulent times

<i>Rhetor (Office)</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Chapter</i>
Tony Abbott (Opposition leader)	Welcome to US President Barack Obama	Nov 2011	3
Julia Gillard (Prime Minister)	The misogyny speech	Oct 2012	4
Bob Carr (former Foreign Minister)	Cabinet diary publication	Apr–May 2014	5
Kevin Rudd (former Prime Minister)	Royal commission testimony	May 2014	6
Noel Pearson (Indigenous leader)	Eulogy for former prime minister Gough Whitlam	Dec 2014	7
Malcolm Turnbull (Prime Minister)	Taking office	Sep 2015	8

*Source* Prepared by authors

Australian commentators, nor the short-term prime minister provoking despair among his party colleagues who eventually replaced him with the current Prime Minister Turnbull. The rhetorical performance we encounter here is as the leader of the opposition during a visit to Canberra by President Barack Obama, when Abbott directs his public rhetoric to the state of the military alliance with the USA, thereby carrying forward some of the *ethos* cultivated so energetically by former conservative leader John Howard. Abbott goes one step further than his political mentor: breaking with convention and using the opportunity to criticise government policy, specifically that preventing uranium sales to India and contrasting it with the American policy allowing Indian purchases of the controversial resource. The Labor government and President Obama might represent progressive political forces retuning the type of alliance managed by Howard and the George W. Bush presidency; so Abbott as opposition leader rescripts the sentiment by invoking an alternative creed probably embarrassing to Labor Prime Minister Gillard and uncomfortable to President Obama.

Our examination of Gillard could have focused on her remarkable replacement of Rudd, or her equally remarkable win at her only national election, or her craft and command during her more than two years as head of a minority government which posted records in terms of the numbers of government bills passed through both houses without government majorities. But the moment we examine is about her



**Table 2.2** Chronology of Australia's political turbulence

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
2007	The Australian Labor Party wins national government with Rudd as prime minister and Gillard as his deputy
2007–2010	The global financial crisis moves the Rudd government to make massive public expenditure turning a budget surplus into deficit. As a result, Australia avoided the recessions experienced in other developed nations. The spending includes the ill-fated Home Insulation Program
Dec 2009	Abbott successfully challenges Turnbull for the Liberal Party leadership to circumvent a deal being brokered with Labor on climate change policy
Jun 2010	Gillard replaces Rudd as party leader and prime minister due to inaction on mining and climate change policies
Aug 2010	Labor's election campaign is undermined by leaks until a deal was struck for Rudd to become foreign minister. Gillard defeats Abbott by forming a minority government with the Greens and independents
Nov 2011	Abbott's welcome to US President Barack Obama
Dec 2011	Gillard arranges for Liberal MP Peter Slipper to become Speaker of the House, diminishing Abbott's numbers
Apr 2012	The media reported Slipper was the subject of sexual harassment complaints – Slipper stands aside while legal actions proceed Rudd unsuccessfully challenges Gillard for party leadership Carr is appointed to a senate vacancy and replaces Rudd as foreign minister
Oct 2012	Gillard delivers the misogyny speech, Slipper resigns that evening
Jun 2013	Rudd successfully challenges Gillard to become prime minister again. Gillard moves to the backbench and indicates she will leave parliament after completing her term – she does
Sep 2013	The Liberal/National coalition win government and Abbott becomes prime minister with an agenda which includes a royal commission into the Home Insulation Program Gillard leaves parliament. Carr departs in October and Rudd in November
May 2014	Carr publishes <i>Diary of a Foreign Minister</i>
May 2014	Rudd testifies to the <i>Royal Commission into the Home Insulation Program</i>
Dec 2014	Pearson delivers his eulogy for Gough Whitlam
Feb 2015	Liberal backbenchers call for a leadership spill. The call is defeated
Sep 2015	Turnbull successfully challenges Abbott and becomes prime minister Abbott remains in parliament as a backbencher

*Source* Prepared by authors

internationally famous 'misogyny' speech in the national parliament when she responded with fiery rhetoric to opposition leader Abbott's persistent allegations of misrule. There are other episodes in Gillard's political career which could also stand out as moments for significant

public rhetoric, such as her party contests with Rudd, or her final party defeat by Rudd, or her eventual resignation from parliament at the 2013 election. But the rhetoric of the misogyny speech best illustrates the national and international reputation of Gillard as a partisan of a type of gender politics not emphasised by her at other times. What can a leader of government do to discourage distemper in fractious oppositions? Gillard's answer stands out as a significant character rebuke to a sexist opposition leader—who later forced Gillard to make way for Rudd who was in turn defeated at the next election.

Within Gillard's leadership team stood Bob Carr, once premier of Australia's most populous state, New South Wales,<sup>1</sup> for more than a decade: 1995–2005. He is now something of an Australian public intellectual, writing four books—including the one examined here about his time in national politics as the foreign minister in Gillard's government. Carr was appointed to the Senate to replace a retiring New South Wales Labor senator: he was thus never really elected to the Australian parliament. He did indeed stand for the 2013 election and won office as a senator—only to retire and so not serve in the opposition to the newly elected Abbott government. What does a public intellectual do in office as a nation's foreign minister? Carr illustrates exceptionalism in politics: he served a decade as opposition leader before winning office at the state level in 1995. He had proven himself as a party leader at the state level for over two decades. His interest in national office is quite recent. Somewhat as an experiment, he used the office as foreign minister to inject himself into international politics, almost as though he was trumping the person who preceded him as foreign minister: Rudd. Carr had certain major responsibilities, including winning international support for Australia's election to the UN Security Council. But an unstated responsibility was 'the book', which illustrates Carr's unusual public rhetoric as it reveals the author's personal perspective on world politics. Importantly, the *Diary of a Foreign Minister* invokes a public rhetoric of amused self-criticism to reveal the difficulties Carr faced balancing Australian interests between those of the Chinese and American superpowers, and the eternally tricky Palestine–Israel conflict. Carr's audience is not quite the same as the electors valued so dearly by Rudd, Abbott and Turnbull: his audience is his readership who can expect to grow in admiration of the legitimacy of the intellectual author who used high national office to observe global politics for what only its insiders can see.

As Labor leader, Rudd famously restored his party to the government after a decade of conservative rule. He is also famous for losing the confidence of his party and for his tenacious resumption of the office of prime minister—and for losing government to Abbott who had generated the fiercest form of opposition Australia had seen in many decades. But the Rudd examined here comes from his time after leaving parliamentary life, when he was called to appear before a royal commission into aspects of governance shaped by the global financial crisis. Suddenly, long out of office, the former prime minister faced extensive public accountability about the high costs, including the deaths of government-funded roofing insulators, from his former policies to implement national recovery programs to help Australia spend its way out of the threat of recession. The Rudd seen here is the former head of government sitting alone in the dock, using his surprising public rhetoric to reframe and redirect suspicions of political opponents away from any supposed liability and towards his superior statecraft as head of Cabinet which achieved outcomes often forgotten or ignored by a complacent community.

The penultimate case study is about a civil society leader, Noel Pearson, who is one of Australia's most influential indigenous figures. Pearson ranks as a public leader mainly because of his prominent role as advocate and commentator on reconciliation of indigenous peoples across Australia. He is also something of a policy innovator, running the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership and implementing important educational reforms through schools for remote Indigenous communities. But the aspect we examine of Pearson's activism during this recent period in Australian politics is his acclaimed address in honour of former Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam who died in October 2014, during Abbott's time as prime minister. Pearson spoke at a large Sydney commemoration for the late Labor leader. Pearson's speech is a good example of what non-partisan community figures can do to celebrate a life in partisan politics. Pearson is often identified as close to the conservative side of Australian politics, in part because of his frequent association with the Murdoch daily newspaper, *The Australian*, for which he writes frequently. But on this occasion, Pearson used his public rhetoric to honour the sort of public leadership exercised by Whitlam who has often been written down in Australian estimates of effective policy and governance leadership. Pearson stands here as the remarkable outsider who can see the real public value of the typical insider like Whitlam. Pearson's civic pride in Whitlam's public leadership is an important

contrast to some of the less pride-worthy behaviour examined earlier in this book.

The current Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, only just held on to the office at his first election as head of government. But the Turnbull examined here is not the somewhat deflated leader of a new government after the 2016 national election but the earlier figure who had patiently waited on his parliamentary colleagues to have him replace existing Prime Minister Abbott. The Turnbull we see is the public figure Turnbull wanted the community to see as he stepped into the highest political office: facing disgruntled supporters of the former prime minister, Turnbull used his considerable rhetorical power to replace the stale Abbott narrative with a new narrative about national pride not in conservatism but in innovation. Seizing the opportunity of national eminence, Turnbull retold the national tale by switching the focus away from the historical achievements celebrated by Howard and Abbott (often: military endeavour and sporting excellence) towards the challenge of future innovation in business and science. The irony emerges when we see that Turnbull paid a huge price for winning the support of his governing party—which has restrained his independence so that his rhetoric of policy innovation has faded away as quickly as has community confidence. This example proves something important about the limits of public rhetoric, given that the Turnbull Australia has won seems to have lost so much of the Turnbull vision with which he began his term in office.

## CONCLUSION

Bryce warned that democratic regimes depend in no small part on voters acting ‘under the influence of misrepresentations contrived to mislead them’ (Bryce 1921, vol. 1, 181). Imperfect forms of public leadership can be exercised by non-leaders who mislead, in contrast to the more diligent work of leaders who strive to lead more deliberatively and responsibly. An effective democracy has to find institutions or mechanisms to defend those who resist being misled and who strive to remain ‘unseduced by the demagogue’: this defence requires the support of what Bryce calls ‘courage’ to resist the excitement ‘to overbear opposition’ which marks so many defective forms of so-called public leadership

(Bryce 1921, vol. 1, 182). We wait to see how effective our set of Australian leaders have been in displaying this kind of civic courage.

Leadership refers not only to powerful *individuals* but also to *groups* sharing power. Politicians are good examples of one of those most influential groups sharing power. Some politicians are in government, others are in opposition: but together they share much of the conventional political power used to represent and govern the political communities they serve. Political leaders have many good reasons not to do all the work of public leadership in public: the ends of security requires the means of secrecy protecting many aspects of government leadership from immediate public scrutiny. Thus, the term 'public leadership' can refer to the leadership of the public exercised either publicly or privately. But in many ways, public leadership refers to the power exercised over the public, often but not always by leaders who perform in public. One of the most important but controversial public actions of many leaders is their public rhetoric: especially what they say about the types of leadership they practice, either as holders of authoritative power or as influential critics or opponents of those in power.

This book examines the use of public rhetoric by political leaders. The aim is to highlight selected examples of leadership rhetoric: samples or case studies of the way leaders perform their public leadership. There is no one simple model of leadership rhetoric. Some political leaders use their time in opposition to highlight their leadership legitimacy as a rehearsal for serving more powerfully in government, once they win sufficient public confidence. Other political leaders use their time in government to do what they can to sustain public confidence in their leadership legitimacy. Other public leaders remain on the edges of politics, using their power in civil society to perform as public advocates, with their public rhetoric often used to hold the political community to procedures of public integrity and benchmarks of accountability. Time now to examine these variations in more specific detail.

## NOTE

1. Australian governments are led by the prime minister at the national or federal level, premiers in States and chief ministers in the self-governing Territories.

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