

# Political Speak: Double Talk vs Plain English

## 2005 Sydney Writers' Festival panel session

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Like politicians, academics are often condemned for waffling, spreading jargon, and using five words where one will do. And it's cultural studies practitioners—people in my field—who are often in the firing line. Sometimes we deserve it.

Take the following excerpt, which I chose pretty much at random from a book on my shelves. I won't name the author because I don't want to tell on him, but here's what he has to say about TV: "Television is a placeless placing, and the televised is always displaced; replaced by and in this placeless place". He continues: "Placeless place, of course, says only very *unclearly* what sort of location television is".

There is, unquestionably, quite a bit of verbal sludge being pumped out in the name of academic writing and critical thinking—though not as much as conservative columnists would have you think. But the same is true of many other genres—government reports, press releases, corporate PowerPoint presentations, Oscar acceptance speeches, sports and finance journalism and, to arrive at our topic today, political rhetoric.

My point is that the demand that we all speak more plainly is one that could (and probably should) be levelled at many fields and genres. But in making this demand, I think we need to pay more attention to what we mean by plain speaking, because language isn't a transparent container for meaning. The same word can mean many different things, depending on who's speaking and who's listening. People who speak simply and clearly are not always speaking plainly. On the contrary, simple language can be a smokescreen for some rather more sophisticated political and ideological agendas.

Sure it's easy to find grabs of Kim Beazley circumlocuting or Philip Ruddock spouting legal jargon. Or our Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson stumbling hilariously around, trying to explain the long-term psychological damage he believes *Play School* has done to kiddies by exposing them to a two-minute segment featuring a girl with two mummies.

But the real problem today lies elsewhere. Some of our most powerful conservative politicians—including our Prime Minister—are very aware of how irritated most Australians are with waffle and obfuscation. And they've moved on to plain English. Specifically, they're using plain English as a Trojan horse—as a device for manipulating and dividing public debate.

I'm going to give you some examples of how I think this works. But I want to start by identifying the roots of this shift, which are summed up in two words: "Please explain".

Pauline Hanson famously uttered those words in response to a question by a *60 Minutes* reporter who asked her if she was xenophobic. In the early days of her rise to power there was a queue of reporters and commentators waiting to expose the fish-and-chip shop owner from Ipswich as someone who didn't understand polysyllabic words or ABS statistics. It's now a matter of historical record that her supporters saw this as evidence of the elite media conspiracy against ordinary Australians, not as evidence that Hanson was an unfit politician.

Hanson's claim that she was speaking on behalf of people who felt they weren't being listened to holds some water in hindsight. Whatever we think of her policies, she really was the political equivalent of reality TV in the early days of her campaign—raw, unedited, unsophisticated, but genuine in her belief that she represented people who'd been silenced.

But Hanson's intervention in political discourse set the tone for a strategic and far less credible claim to plain speaking. To put it bluntly, I think that conservative politicians, including our Prime Minister, have coopted Hanson's claim to speak the language of 'ordinary' Australians—but with very different motives.

The hallmark of this political 'plain speaking' is a claim to be speaking common sense. The act of communicating (and, implicitly, running a country) is framed as a simple and transparent process where there's no room for disagreement about what key terms like 'Australian' or 'normal' might mean. Anyone who tries to question these terms is then portrayed as someone who's trying to unnecessarily complicate the obvious—as intellectuals, elites, or special interest groups, the kind of people who are out of touch with the real world.

There are so many terms I could focus on today. The phrase 'ordinary Australians' is a beauty. And there are a couple of PhDs begging to be written about what's buried under the

term ‘family values’. But in the short time I’ve got left I want to focus on just two: ‘unAustralian’ and ‘political correctness’.

### **Un-Australian**

According to research undertaken by writer Judith Ireland, *The Macquarie Dictionary* first included the term ‘un-Australian’ in response to a burst of use among politicians like John Howard and Pauline Hanson in the 1990s. Over the years, John Howard has used the term to describe trade unionists attacking Parliament House in 1996; striking wharfies in 1998; anti-globalisation protesters at the Melbourne World Economic Forum in 2000; anti-war marchers in 2003; and to denounce the idea of “cutting and running” from Iraq.

‘Un-Australian’ conduct is defined by *The Macquarie Dictionary* as “not conforming to ideas of traditional Australian morality and customs, such as fairness, honesty and hard work”. The beauty of the term, of course, is that the person uttering it is actually making an implicit claim to represent these values of fairness and morality. They’re making a claim to embody what is central to being Australian.

It’s a term which suggests there is something self-evident about our national identity—that we don’t need to think or talk or argue about who we are or what our values are. That common sense tells us what it means to be Australian.

But clearly that’s not true. History tells us that Australia is constantly changing and that our sense of identity changes with it. Ignoring that fact can lead to some deliciously ironic uses of the term ‘un-Australian’. My favourite is that of a conservative Northern Territory politician who referred to the traditional indigenous owners of Uluru as ‘un-Australian’ because they wanted to ban climbing on the rock.

### **Political Correctness**

This is another Trojan horse term. It’s a term which marks the speaker out as someone who simply wants to inject a bit of common sense into a debate, and who thinks people should be able to speak plainly and freely.

Ironically, claims that this or that person or group is guilty of political correctness is often a way of veiling an attempt to shut someone up. As a lot of writers have noted, PC is a term

that didn't spring up organically in response to terrible left-wing censorship—it was a term which was deliberately invented and successfully marketed by a right-wing US think tank.

The anti-PC movement—which again our conservative politicians have embraced in their rhetoric—is a strategic bid for the moral high ground. It's not Aboriginals or women or asylum seekers who've been oppressed, the term suggests—it's decent middle class white blokes who no-one is listening to.

If 'political correctness' ever had any usefulness it was as a label for pompous nitpicking and bloodless moralising. But you only have to wind up some of our conservative politicians on issues like 'family values' to realise that that the left has no monopoly on sanctimony or boorishness.

And in a climate where our Federal Government feels free to be openly contemptuous of the United Nations' right to set international standards for human rights and where both parties endorse a lock-em-out or lock-em-up policy on asylum seekers, it's getting pretty hard to find any evidence of the awesome left-wing domination that the PC contingent claims public policy is in thrall to.

But perhaps there's another way of looking at this ongoing obsession with PC. Maybe the anti-PC lobby have seen something about our political and social future that doesn't seem obvious right now. Maybe this hyperbolic fear of being silenced is really a fear that the people who matter—the kind of people who'll lead the country in the future—stopped listening to people like them years ago.

In conclusion, and speaking plainly myself, I'm very hopeful that will be the case.