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Missing in action? The ‘non’-climate change debate of the 2013 Australian federal election

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Abstract

While Liberal Party leader – and now PM – Tony Abbott declared the 2013 Australian federal election to be a ‘referendum on the carbon tax’, debate on climate change by both major parties, as a problem and as a policy, appeared to be largely absent. This paper examines the discursive characteristics of this debate by examining the election launch speeches of both party leaders and by using the Leximancer text analytics software to map both the frequency and conceptual relationships within mainstream media coverage. The strength of this software is that it allows a researcher to both map the quantitative nature of the linguistic characteristics of a corpus of texts, and to use this conceptual mapping to examine the results qualitatively. The paper concludes that quantitatively, in comparison with the previous two elections, climate change was a second order issue. Further, a qualitative analysis of the debate that did occur, concluded that it was largely framed in relation to the politically contentious ‘carbon tax’. Building on these results, it then discusses whether the apparent waning of political will by both major parties to substantially engage Australian voters on the need to take carbon abatement seriously, is a genuine reflection of voter apathy, a reaction to an over reliance upon opinion polls or symptomatic of a broader political and media disconnect.

Introduction

Political debate around climate change policy has been central to much of the drama, rancor and division that has characterised Australian politics since 2007 when Kevin Rudd famously declared climate change to be ‘the greatest moral challenge of our generation’ (Rudd, 2007). Since that time, the political fortunes of Rudd himself and of his successor Julia Gillard, as well as of Liberal Party leaders Brendan Nelson, Malcolm Turnbull and now-PM Tony Abbott, have pivoted around their various positions on the issue. Climate change policy, according to one commentator, has become ‘the black death of Australian politics’ (Hanson, 2010).

By the time of the September 2013 election, after three years of minority Labor government, the political sparring largely revolved around Julia Gillard’s so-called ‘carbon tax lie’ (Bolt, 2012). In an attempt to recalibrate her position during the 2010 election, Gillard stated in an interview that ‘I don’t rule out the possibility of legislating a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, a market-based mechanism, I rule out a carbon tax’ (Kelly & Shanahan, 2010). It was the last part of this statement, largely misquoted and out of context, that provided the rhetorical prism through which Abbott’s opposition to Gillard and her ‘illegitimate’, ‘chaotic’ government, was focused. He pledged a ‘blood oath’ to repeal the carbon tax legislation should he become prime minister, describing it as ‘the longest political suicide note in Australian history’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2011).

While both major parties maintained during the 2013 election that they were concerned about combating climate change, and committed to the implementation of effective policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the political momentum appeared to have waned and any consensus appeared irretrievably lost. This paper uses a variety of media and political sources to examine both the extent and the nature of the debate by the two major parties during the election. The media sources are examined primarily using the Leximancer text analytics program which maps the quantitative nature of the corpus and then uses this conceptual mapping to explore the linguistic connections qualitatively. From this, the paper then considers some of the broader factors that have contributed to the manner in which the policy and politics of climate change have played out in the Australian political context.

From 'the greatest moral challenge of our generation' to 'axe the tax'

Climate change as a domestic and international issue, has become a scene of political and ideological struggle. As an ideological issue, it has run parallel with, and can be seen to be influenced by, both major shifts in the political economy of mainstream media and major structural changes in the political party systems in Western democracies more broadly (Blyth & Katz, 2005; Jones, 2012; J. Keane, 2013). As an area of knowledge, climate change has become highly contested in the public arena (Boykoff, 2011; Hamilton, 2010; Hulme, 2009; Moser & Dilling, 2007), creating what Rudd government climate advisor Professor Ross Garnaut described as a 'diaboli challenge' (AAP, 2008). This is due to the complex and long term nature of the problem, the lack of international political consensus, and the power of vested interests to sway the public debate and the political imperatives.

The historical timeline for the ' Sturm und Drang' of climate change policy and politics in Australia is reasonably well known (for a comprehensive overview see Talberg, Hui, & Loynes, 2013). During Rudd's first term as prime minister – 2007-2010 – policy action on climate change via the introduction of an emissions trading scheme (ETS), support for collective international action by signing the Kyoto Protocol and involvement in the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, were central planks in the Labor Party narrative. In 2007, Rudd was able to harness and cultivate the prevailing zeitgeist of global warming concern to distinguish himself from the traditional conservatism of former prime minister John Howard who had belatedly added the introduction of an emissions trading scheme to his 2007 election platform (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007). Howard has described himself as being an 'agnostic' on the subject, saying that he took the policy to the 2007 election because he could sense the public mood for action on the basis of the precautionary principle even though he believed (and continues to believe) that the predictions of environmental catastrophe are exaggerated (AAP, 2013).

In June 2013, the Labor government, wrecked by internal dissent, returned to a reportedly despised former leader (Vasek, 2012) in an effort to 'save the furniture' (Grattan, 2013) from an impending electoral disaster. By the time of Rudd's 'second coming' as prime minister, particularly in the wake of six years of bruising political debate, the prevailing 'orthodoxy' was that public support for action on climate change had largely dissipated, despite the ongoing Lowy Poll of 2013 showing a resurgence in concern about global warming and support for action (Lowy Institute, 2013). Once reinstated, Rudd attempted to distance himself from the poisoned semantic chalice of the so-called 'great big new tax on everything' (Parkinson & Vorrath, 2011), announcing that a re-elected Labor government would scrap the 'carbon tax' and move to an emissions trading scheme one year earlier than had previously been announced (Benson, 2013).

The alternate 'Direct Action Plan' (Liberal Party of Australia, 2010) was derided widely by both economists and environmentalists (Wade, 2013), described at one stage by previous Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull as a 'fig leaf' (Turnbull, 2009b), and by Ross Garnaut, the architect of Rudd's original ETS, as 'like a Martian beauty contest' (Hannam & Swan, 2014) in that its lack of detail or costing would mean that the Senate would be unable to see what it was voting for. Regardless of the inconsistency of Tony Abbott's various positions on climate change (see a summary in B. Keane, 2011), or of the inherent contradiction of the Liberal Party opposing a market-based mechanism, Abbott declared the 2013 election to be 'a referendum on the carbon tax' (Griffiths, 2013). The notion of the need to address climate change as a moral imperative, or to minimize its potential impact on the environment, appeared to be missing from the debate.

Does the tail wag the dog? The role of media in driving the political debate around climate change policy

In order to test these assertions in the Australian context, this research has focused on the language of the debate as it has been reported in mainstream media during the 2013 election period. The role of the media in influencing public attitudes to climate change has been widely discussed (for example see: Boykoff, 2011; Cox, 2010; Hansen, 2010; Lester & Hutchins, 2013; Painter, 2013). The theory of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) for example, contends that while media attention to particular issues does not necessarily tell people *what* to think, it influences what they *think about* by signaling an issue's relative importance in broader public debate. Cottle (2013) however, asserts that the relationship is more complex and that we need to move beyond 'media-

centrism' to also consider the power of institutional factors such as competing 'news values' as well as the power of 'claims makers' in the privileging of certain perspectives, representations and discourses. Audience studies he points out, 'tell us that people make sense of media representations of the environment through multiple and often overlapping interpretative frames' (Cottle, 2013, p. 24). The complex psychological and cultural relationship that people have with the environment (Hamilton, 2010; Merchant, 1993) plus the power of think tank lobbies and other vested interests to muddy the waters (Oreskes & Conway, 2010), are examples of some of these factors.

If mass media representations don't directly drive public opinion on climate change, they are, however, a significant contributor in 'shaping our perceptions, considerations and actions' (Boykoff, 2011, p. 28). In particular, Boykoff points to the weight given to media coverage by political actors that makes the study of media representations important. He says that:

“ ... to the extent that elected officials, (climate) policy negotiators and rank-and-file policy actors view amplified media attention to climate change (and pressure for action), these trends have the potential to catalyse climate mitigation and adaptation actions. Conversely, a diminished amount of coverage can be seen as detrimental to putting forward strong climate policies (Boykoff, 2011, p. 28). ”

While quantity of news coverage is not necessarily an indication of quality or a measure of influence, it was a useful starting point for this analysis. Various studies have tracked both the number and substance of climate change coverage during the past several years. In a study of world newspaper coverage between 2004 and 2010 (a sample of which included Fairfax and News Limited publications in Australia), Boykoff (2011, p. 22) noted an increase in the volume of coverage of about five times compared to the turn of the millennium. The graphed trend shows a series of peaks and troughs due to the intercession of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 (trough) and the Copenhagen Climate Conference in December 2009 (peak). In Australia, this trend is supported by Crikey's *Media Monitors* whose figures show climate change in Australia during 2009 as being the single biggest issue when all media were counted. In 2012, the carbon tax ranked third when all media were counted (cited in Painter, 2013, pp. 80-81).

In comparison, in a study which looked more specifically at the focus of the news coverage, as opposed to the sheer volume, Bacon (2013) examined the pattern of climate science reporting across 10 Australian publications during February-April in both 2011 and 2012 and noted both a drop of both 19% in the overall number of articles, and a 9% drop in those with a climate science focus (the 2012 sample was taken after the introduction of the Clean Energy Bill in November 2011). The results of these studies would, on the surface, indicate a shift of focus from the problem and policy to the politics in this period. This is consistent with US studies by McCright and Dunlap (2011) and Brulle et al (2012) whose empirical study of the relationship between public levels of concern and climate change coverage in the US 2004-2010 concluded that:

“ ... information-based science advocacy has had only a minor effect on public concern, while political mobilization by elites and advocacy groups is critical in influencing climate change concern. ”

Was climate change 'missing in action'?

A starting point for this enquiry was to compare the level of coverage of climate change during the three most recent federal elections. I did three initial searches of the ProQuest ANZ Newstand database (which sources news stories from Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea) using the search terms 'climate change' and 'climate change' + 'moral' and 'climate change' + 'carbon tax'. The date ranges used were from the formal election announcement to actual polling day. The use of the search term 'moral' aimed to capture the extent to which Rudd's 'greatest moral challenge' catchphrase was still being cited in discussions of the topic and also if the coverage discussed the moral or ethical implications of climate change politics or policy. Fig 1 compares the raw number of 'hits' for the three searches.

Fig 1: Comparative results of search in Pro-Quest ANZ Newstand for numbers of climate change stories during the Australian federal elections 2007, 2010 and 2013



SEARCH TERMS	2007	2010	2013
	14 Oct-24 Nov	17 July-21Aug	5 Aug-7 Sept
'Climate change'	3928	3851	1568
'Climate change' + 'moral'	115	154	66
'Climate change' + 'carbon tax'	171	502	463

A comparison of the pure quantitative count of news stories, (after culling duplicates, non-Australian news outlets and non-Australian stories), shows that there was a dramatic decrease (almost 40%) in the raw number of stories mentioning the phrase 'climate change' between the 2007 and 2013 elections ($n=3928$ in 2007 to $n=1568$ in 2013). There was roughly a 50% decrease in those which included both the words 'climate change' and 'moral' between the years 2007 ($n=115$) and 2013 ($n=66$), although the number rose between 2007 and 2010 ($n=154$).

Looking at the figures for the terms 'climate change' and 'carbon tax', again there was a slight decrease between 2010 ($n=502$) and 2013 ($n=463$ or a decrease of approx. 8%). The differences for the second and third searches can partly be explained by the fact that in 2007 the term 'carbon tax' was not widely used and, by the time of the 2013 election, the use of Rudd's 'greatest moral challenge' catchphrase had waned as his political fortunes wavered. However, given the elevated political prominence over the preceding parliamentary periods to the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (the Rudd government's rebadged emission trading scheme) and the Clean Energy Bill (the Gillard governments 'carbon tax'), the overall level of decrease is still significant.

The campaign launch speeches: 'Don't mention the climate ...'

A second useful source for a sense of the importance of an issue, or the prism through which political parties wish to frame their campaign narratives, is the campaign launch speech. Political speeches have an important strategic place in political discourse (Glover, 2007) as they are explicitly written to set the agenda, vocabulary and tone of the debate. As sources of analysis, speeches allow a direct view of how the political actors in question, as 'primary definers' (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978), wish to be 'seen'. While this article doesn't propose to discuss these in any detail, I examined the speeches of both Rudd and Abbott for the extent to which they mentioned climate change, the environment and/or the carbon tax, and in what general context.

Rudd's speech in comparison to Abbott's was relatively short: 90 paragraphs compared to 145. While he mentions the economy, economic growth, economic challenges, jobs, living standards, and the relatively low level of government debt and so on in 31/90 of these paragraphs, climate change is mentioned only once, only in a cursory fashion, and is relegated to the 66th paragraph. Here he says:

“ And on climate change, our plans are clear while Mr. Abbott, a climate change denier from way back, has an approach he has never properly explained and it does not work [para 66] (Rudd, 2013). ”

There is no mention of his promise to repeal the carbon tax, of its replacement with an emissions trading scheme or of Labor's continuing commitment to addressing the 'great moral challenge'.

While Abbott's speech mentions the carbon tax more often as you would expect given that the carbon tax repeal was a central election promise, it is still only mentioned directly in 5/145 separate paragraphs: twice with respect to its impact on the cost of living, twice reiterating the promise to repeal it, and once with respect to its political cost to Rudd. He says for example:

“ We'll scrap the carbon tax so your family will be \$550 a year better off. [para 14]
We'll abolish the carbon tax so power prices and gas prices will go down. [para 27]
He [Rudd] knows that the carbon tax has been a disaster – that's why he's faked abolishing it [para 108] (Abbott, 2013b). ”

Like Rudd's speech, 37/145 paragraphs are devoted to the theme of 'building a stronger economy so everyone can get ahead', the promise to achieve a budget surplus, and how a future Abbott government proposes to deal with various examples of Labor's profligacy. In both, climate change is a 'non' subject. The positive impact of the carbon tax on reducing emissions from electricity generation (Australian Government, 2014) is not mentioned, and he frames associated emissions reduction instrumentalities, such as the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, as a form of corporate welfare:

“ The Clean Energy Finance Corporation will cease making non-commercial loans with taxpayers' money [para 38]. ”

Their role in encouraging commercial investment in clean and renewable energy is ignored.

From the point of view of the environment, there are two curious paragraphs in Abbott's speech worth noting. In paragraph 94, he has a veiled swipe at those he has previously labeled 'eco-fundamentalists' and alludes to themes raised in a much earlier speech titled 'A Realist's Approach to Climate Change' (Abbott, 2009). This is a theme that reverberates through other parts of this speech particularly in terms of freeing the economy from unnecessary government interference so that Australia can once more be 'open for business'. He says:

“ When I look at farmers and fishermen and foresters, I don't see people despoiling the environment but people who are our best conservationists because that is the only way that their children and grandchildren can follow the same calling [para 94]. ”

Along with 'direct action' and the 15,000 strong 'green army who will be working with councils, farmers and volunteers to clean up our polluted waterways and restore our degraded bush' [para 46], the implication is that imposing restraints from above is unnecessary because people can be trusted to do the right thing when it is in their economic interests to do so. Any necessary actions are relegated to the responsibility of individuals, rather than corporate entities or national governments, the logic being that it can be taken for granted that individuals will be appropriately motivated by their concern for their family's future. The environment, and the need to care for it, is still framed in terms of future individual economic needs. The role of capitalism – and its appropriation of environmental resources – is not mentioned.

Further, the final paragraphs allude to Abbott's view of the need to restore the political status quo in terms of environmentalism. This seems to require its removal from the mainstream political agenda.

“ To Labor voters wondering why your party has sold its soul to the Greens; to Green voters wondering why your party has embraced socialism over environmentalism ..., I say: give my team a chance. [para 135] ”

The conflation of 'socialism' and 'environmentalism' is a form of 'dog whistling' to those who see action on climate change as a surreptitious attempt to undermine capitalism. Malcolm Turnbull made a similar observation in 2009 after he was defeated for the party leadership over his support for Rudd's emissions trading scheme. At the time he wrote in his blog:

“ As Tony observed on one occasion 'climate change is crap' or if you consider his mentor, Senator Minchin, the world is not warming, it's cooling and the climate change issue is part of a vast left wing conspiracy to de-industrialise the world (Turnbull, 2009a). ”

Again the frame of economics is central.

Framing climate change during the 2013 federal election

As a means of understanding how particular issues are broadly represented, analysis of media discourse via close interrogation of representative media texts, has been widely used (for example Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1988). Texts are multifunctional in that they are both 'sites' of power in terms of the production, consumption and conventions of their specific genre, and semiotic systems wherein the 'linguistic choices that are made ... carry ideological meaning' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 25). An important limitation that must be acknowledged here is that any corpus of media texts is never totally complete. Not all voices are represented or even equal. However, the choice of media texts remains important as sources of insight and analysis. According to Stuart Hall and colleagues:

“ The media define for the majority of the population *what* significant events are taking place, but, also, they offer powerful interpretations of *how* to understand these events. Implicit in those interpretations are orientations towards the events and the people or groups involved in them (Hall et al., 1978, p. 57). ”

Additionally, the study of news frames (for example Entman, 2003; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Hansen, 2010) allows a more nuanced view of how issues are represented, how possible actions are promoted and the manner in which the language, style and choices of rhetorical elements work to appeal 'in perceiving, thinking and communicating, to structured ways of interpreting experiences' (Boykoff, 2011). Therefore, examining how media use language in their coverage of both climate change in general, and the politics and policies in particular, is important as it can give insight into the prisms or frames through which we understand the issues. As Fairclough (1995) argues, language is a central source for:

“ ... the fundamental concerns of social analysis: questions of knowledge, belief and ideology ..., questions of social relationships and power, and questions of identity (Fairclough, 1995, p. 17). ”

From Fillmore's (1976) and Goffman's (1974) early work on frame analysis, we can see that frames are mental or cognitive processes that operate linguistically and act through the lens of both memory, context, existing worldviews and cultural beliefs. According to Nisbet (2009):

“ Frames are interpretative storylines that set a specific train of thought in motion, communicating why an issue might be a problem, who or what is responsible for and what should be done about it (Nisbet, 2009, p. 15). ”

In the case of climate change, Nisbet proposes a typology of competing frames which include: social progress, scientific and technical uncertainty, Pandora's box/Frankenstein's monster, conflict and strategy, morality and ethics and economic development and competitiveness (Nisbet, 2009, p. 18). These, he argues, are not mutually exclusive and that even within any particular frame, differing positions can co-exist.

The power of frames to influence perceptions, reasoning and understanding of particular issues Lakoff (2008) argues, occurs as a result of constant repetition and reinforcement. Dominant frames therefore, by virtue of their repetition, also act to 'naturalise' the discourse, making competing arguments more difficult to contest. Additionally, 'since political ideologies are, of course, characterised by systems of frames, ideological language will activate that ideological system' (Lakoff, 2010, p. 72). The dominant framing of climate change policy through the lens of economics ('the great big new tax on everything') (Gurney, 2012, 2013), has served to narrow the Australian debate to one of short term, hip pocket and economic interests, and to obfuscate the longer term environmental, moral and economic consequences of inaction.

Mapping the focus of climate change reporting during the 2013 federal election using Leximancer

In order to identify the main themes that characterised media coverage of climate change during the 2013 election, a corpus of 1568 news stories that used the keywords 'climate change' between the dates 5 Aug-7 Sept 2013 (the dates of the 'official' election period), was downloaded from the ProQuest ANZ Newstand database. The 'hits' were edited for duplicates and non-Australian stories (the database also covers New Zealand and AAP wire stories) and the identifying metadata was removed. The texts were then uploaded into the Leximancer text analytics and data mining software to map the conceptual relationships (Leximancer.com, 2014).

Leximancer is an Australian-designed software program that uses word occurrence and co-occurrence to automatically generate thematic and conceptual relationships from a corpus of texts without the need for

interpretative coding from the researcher (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Its strength is that it allows qualitative analysis to proceed from a quantitative base. The program generates an interactive concept map and set of explanatory tables which allow a researcher to examine these relationships both visually and at the level of textual themes, the related text and thesaurus terms (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013). After the initial run, I merged several concepts that were merely variations of the same word (e.g. issue/issues, Tony Abbott/Abbott, Kevin Rudd/Rudd). Other important concepts that were initially identified separately, but were spatially close on the concept map and used together in the text such as climate and change (climate change), carbon and tax (carbon tax) and prime and minister (prime minister), were merged and renamed. Figures 2 and 3 show screenshots of the concept map and themes output of the second 'run' of the corpus with all the concepts visible. In Leximancer, the theme labels are automatically generated to reflect the dominant set of concept relationships.

Fig 2: Leximancer concept map 'Climate change' 2013 Australian federal election dataset set at the default 33% theme size

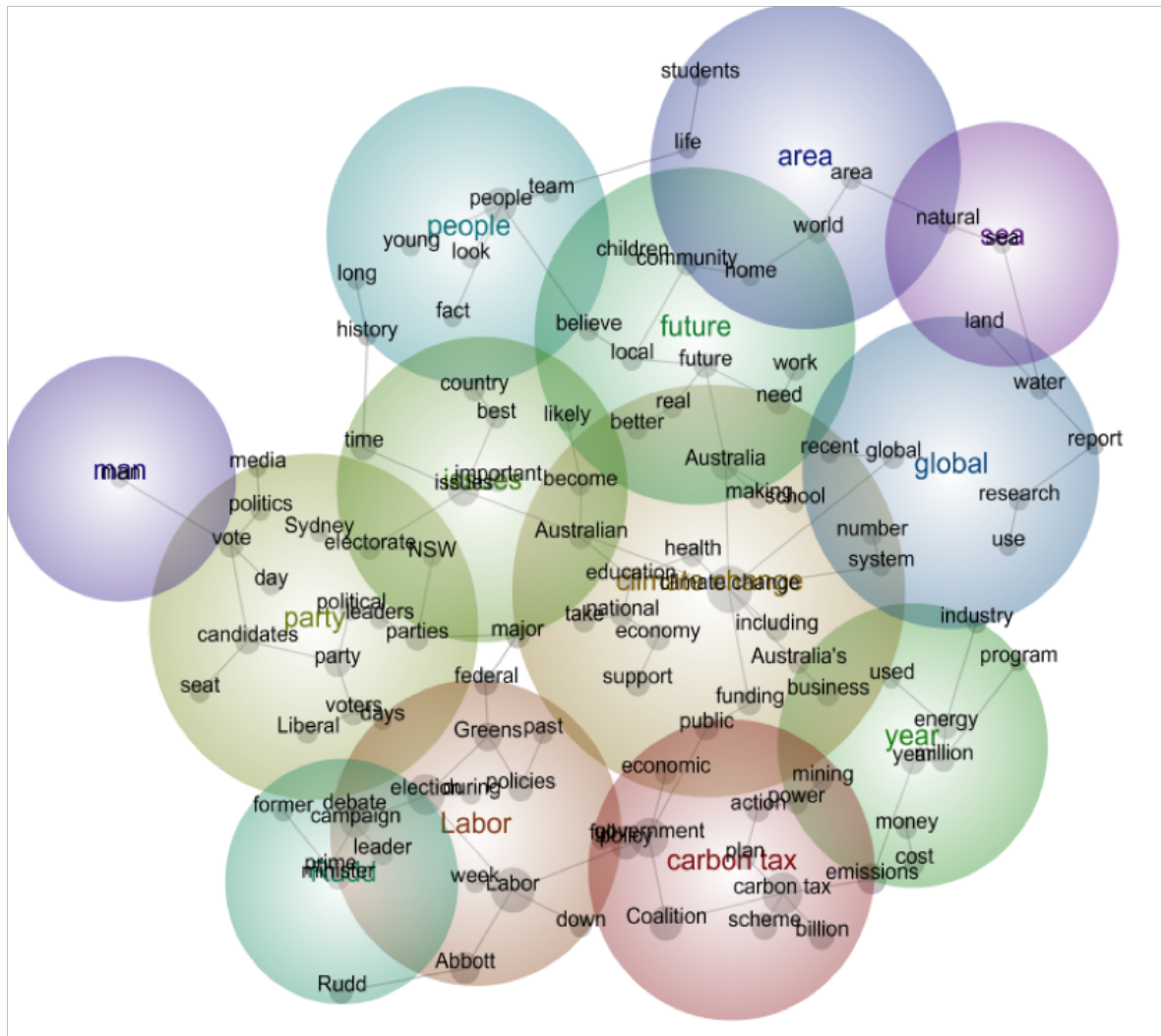
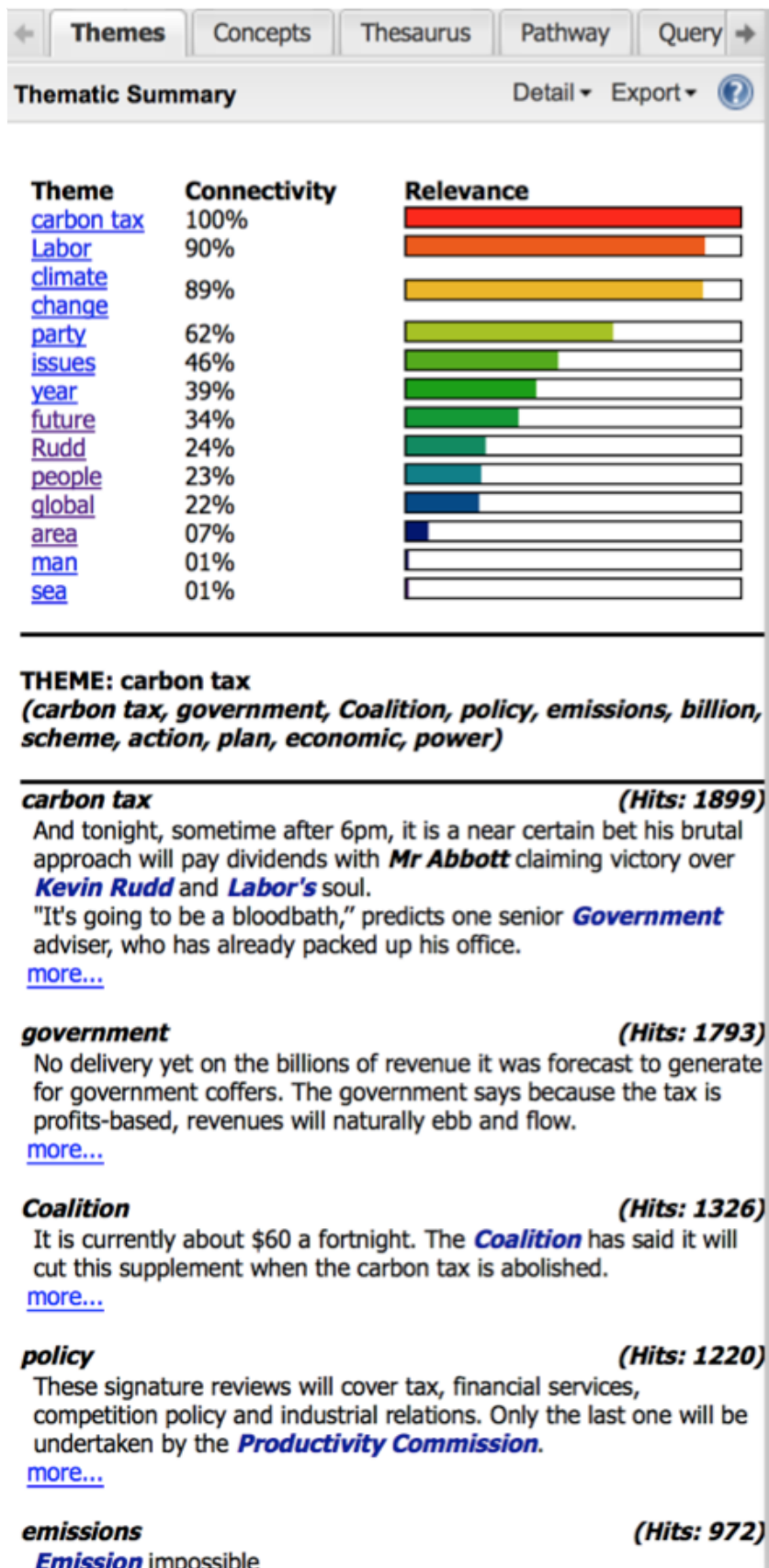


Fig 3: Leximancer thematic summary 'Climate change' 2013 Australian federal election dataset set at the default 33% theme size



The spatial connection between the themes and concepts

At its default 33% theme size, the initial distribution of concepts from the corpus (Fig 2) is interesting. In Leximancer, the most significant themes are visually coded as a heat map, the 'hottest' being in red. This is also shown the theme summary (Fig 3). In this example, the strongest theme was labeled 'carbon tax' and encompassed concepts such as *carbon tax, government, Coalition, policy, emissions, billion, scheme, action, plan, economic, power*. The other themes in order of dominance were 'Labor', 'climate change', 'party', 'issues',

'year', 'future', 'Rudd', 'people', 'global', 'area', 'man' and 'sea'.

If you enlarge or reduce the theme size, concepts may shift into other themes and new themes may emerge: the smaller the theme size, the greater the number of themes, and vice versa. For example, setting the theme size to 50% reconfigures the theme summary. The carbon tax concept is now located within the 'Labor' theme which is now the strongest, with 'climate change', 'party', 'people', 'Rudd', 'world', 'cost' and 'water' in descending order of strength or dominance. At this level, Rudd still commands his own theme, yet the concepts within largely relate to his political status rather than his beliefs or policies as indicated by the named concepts Rudd, prime minister, leader, debate, week, during, days, former. Another point worth noting is that it is not until you reduce the theme size to 15% that specific 'Abbott' and 'Liberal' themes emerge. Prior to that, they are located within the 'Labor' and 'party' themes respectively. The corpus therefore, is more focused on Rudd and on Labor than on the alternative government or its leader.

Exploring the 'carbon tax', 'Labor' and 'climate change' concepts

Given the level of detail within the Leximancer output, I will only summarise what I see as the most salient points of the strongest themes as they relate to the research focus of this paper.

My initial observation was that while the three strongest concepts are obviously closely connected, the fact that 'climate change' ranks third in order of dominance in this corpus is relevant – in other words as a concept on its own, separate from politics, it is *not* the most significant. While this is perhaps understandable given that the media corpus was extracted during an election campaign, it does point to the weight of the focus being on the politics rather than on any communication of the purpose of the policy. This is supported by samples of related text which Leximancer allows you to see – climate change (problem or issue) is mostly being discussed in terms of the carbon tax (policy and politics), its cost, its impact on the economy, on various forms of power generation and in terms of the Coalition's promise to repeal it. Carbon pricing as a policy to reduce emissions by providing a market-based incentive for industries to either reduce their energy dependence or to switch to clean energy sources, is rarely mentioned.

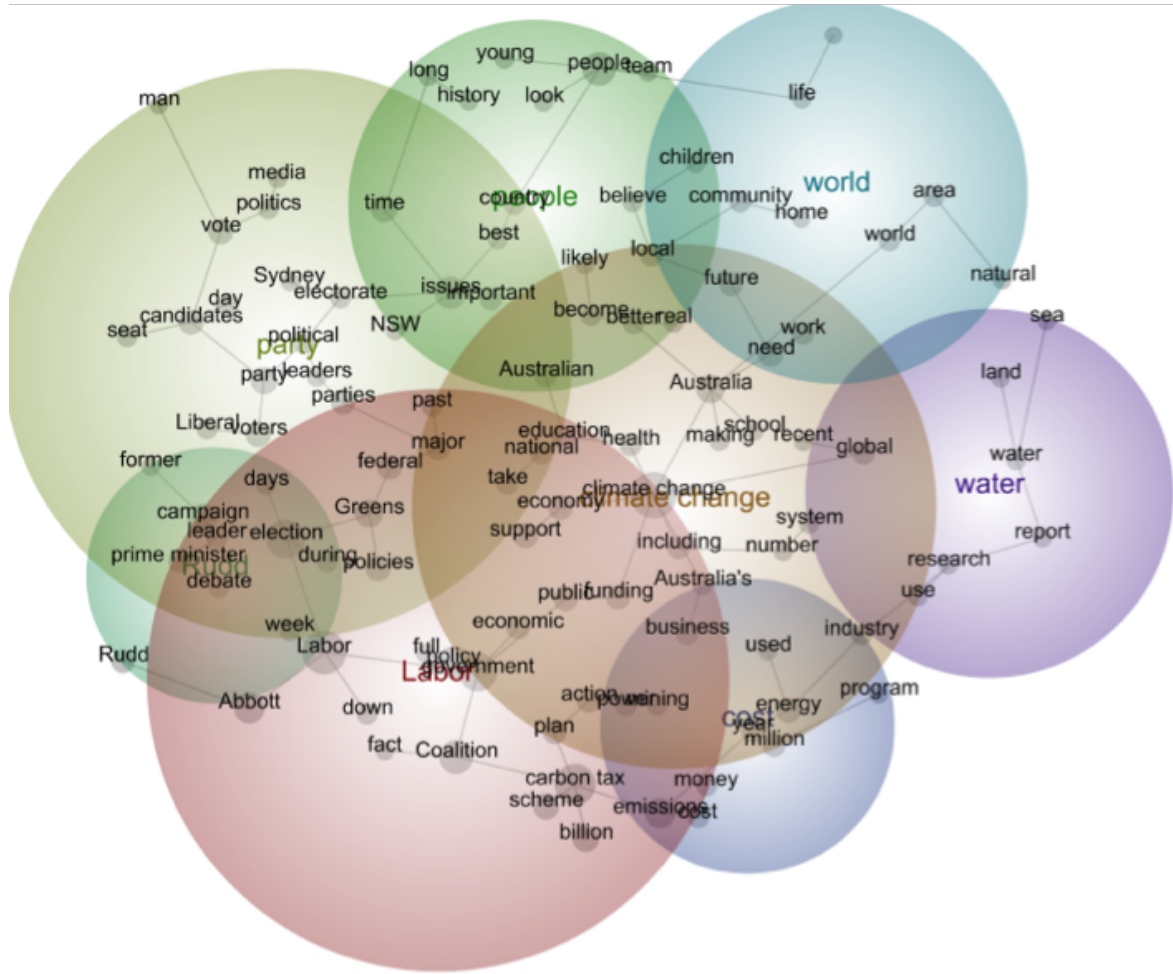
In the Leximancer concept map, those with the strongest connections have visible links in a manner similar to the way in which molecules in a chemical compound chain are represented (see Fig 2). From this perspective, the map draws a direct line between the carbon tax and Coalition concepts indicating that the policy is more directly linked in the corpus to the Opposition than to the government itself. However, the fact that the concepts of government and Coalition are spatially in close proximity within the broader 'carbon tax' theme indicates that they are also closely semantically related. In other words, the frame in which the carbon tax is being discussed in relation to both sides of politics is not dissimilar: while it is the government's policy, and while Labor and Rudd are discussed more often, it is the Coalition's frame which dominates.

The 'Labor' theme ranks second in terms of strength and encompasses the concepts of Labor, election, Abbott, campaign, Greens, policies and federal. As you would expect, much of the focus is on the comparative strengths and strategies of the campaign and the potential outcome of the election and respective policies. Importantly, while both Abbott and the Greens concepts are located within this theme, Rudd is not, even when you enlarge the theme size. The extent to which Labor's 2013 campaign was centred almost solely around Rudd in an attempt to recapture some of the mojo of the Kevin 07 campaign, is an explanation here. The increasing disconnect and antipathy between Rudd and his party which had fuelled many of the party's problems since 2010, was noted, post-election, by then prospective, now incumbent, ALP leader Bill Shorten when he declared, 'The era of the messiah is over. No more messiahs. ...' (Lane, 2013). Interestingly, when you examine some of the illustrative text related to the concepts of leader and prime minister, Abbott is mentioned more often than Rudd (24% to 14%), although often in a sense of questioning his (Abbott's) suitability for the role.

The 'climate change' theme, while ranked third in terms of strength, is the largest and incorporates a greater diversity of concepts as you would expect given the predicted wide ranging ramifications for agriculture, land use, health, tourism and so on. The concepts within include climate change, Australia, support, need, economy, funding, public, education, health, take, including and national. Text references to the economy concept show that the impact of climate change on the economy is largely debated in terms of the carbon tax. However, health is both identified as one of the big three major issues along with education and climate change. The context of the discussion is mostly in terms of the impact of climate change on both the health of the land and on the health of the population generally, and mostly in letters to the editor which are included in the corpus from a range of regional and national newspapers.

Finally, what is telling is that neither 'environment' nor 'science' is present as a concept in this corpus broadly, nor in the 'climate change' theme in particular. However, when the theme size is enlarged to 50%, the *carbon tax* concept is subsumed into the 'Labor' theme, and a 'water' theme emerges (see Fig 4) indicating that this aspect of the impact of climate change in Australia as one of the driest continents is reflected in the discussion.

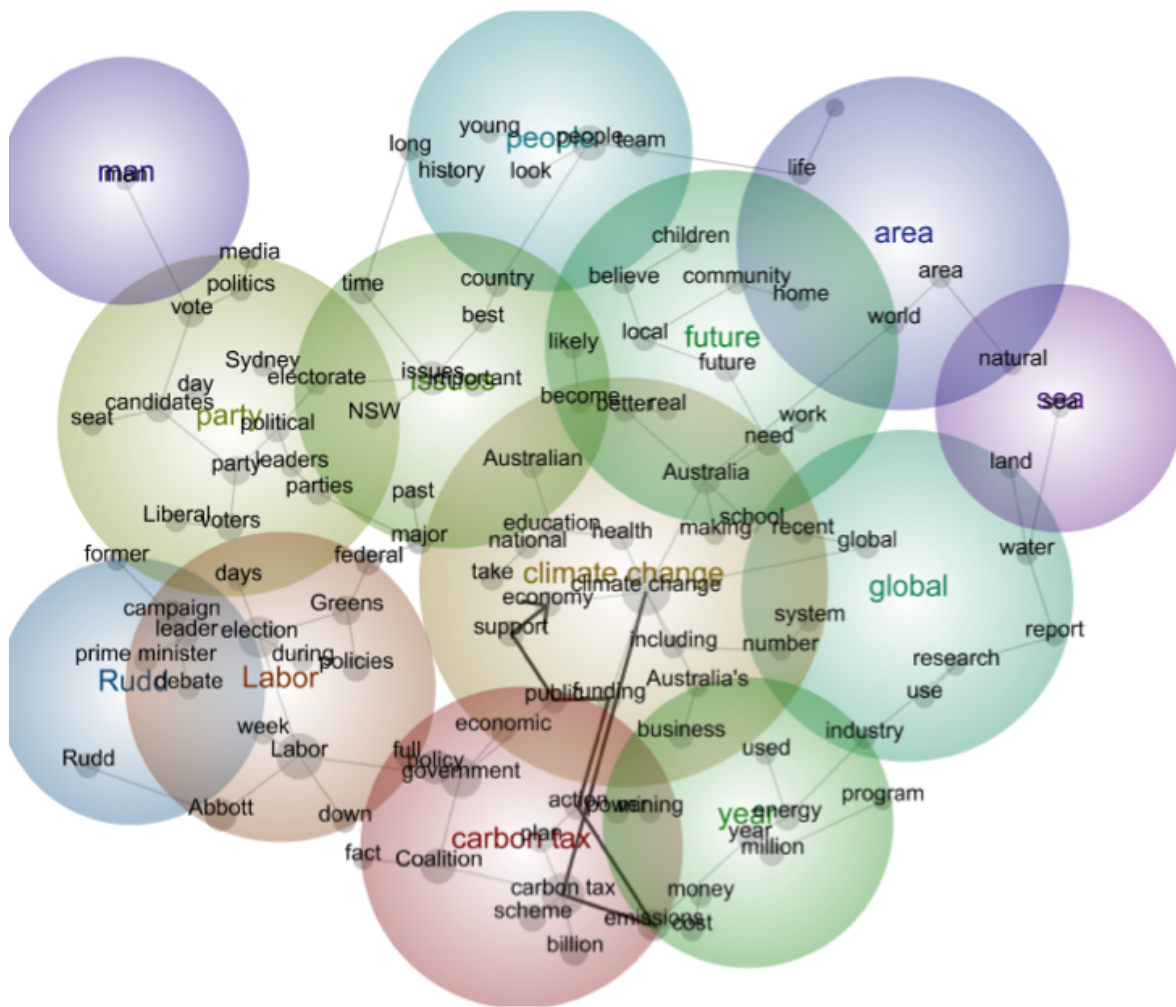
Fig 4: Leximancer concept map 'Climate change' 2013 Australian federal election dataset set at 50% theme size



What do the 'concept pathways' tell us?

In order to explore some of these relationships more closely, 'pathways' were activated between a number of different concepts. The 'pathway' function allows the researcher more closely see indirect mediating and moderating semantic relationships (see Fig 5). This is useful because even though concepts may be closely spatially related on the map, the pathway between them may tell a slightly different story. For example, as Fig 5 illustrates, the pathway between *climate change* and *economy* (which are spatially close within the 'climate change' theme bubble), takes a circuitous route via a range of different concepts including most directly, *carbon tax*. Similarly, when interrogating the relationship between the concepts of *climate change* and *water*, *climate change* and *health*, and *climate change* and *emissions*, in each case the pathway drawn is directly via *carbon tax*. Again, this speaks to the dominance of the carbon tax frame in relation to the various discussions of the impact of climate change in general and the policy in particular.

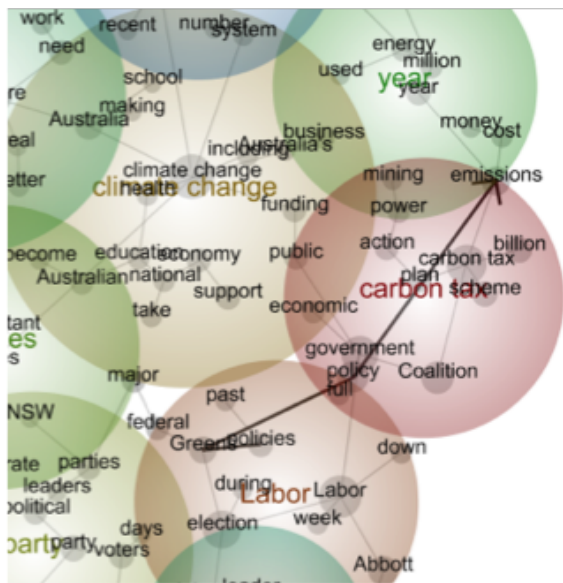
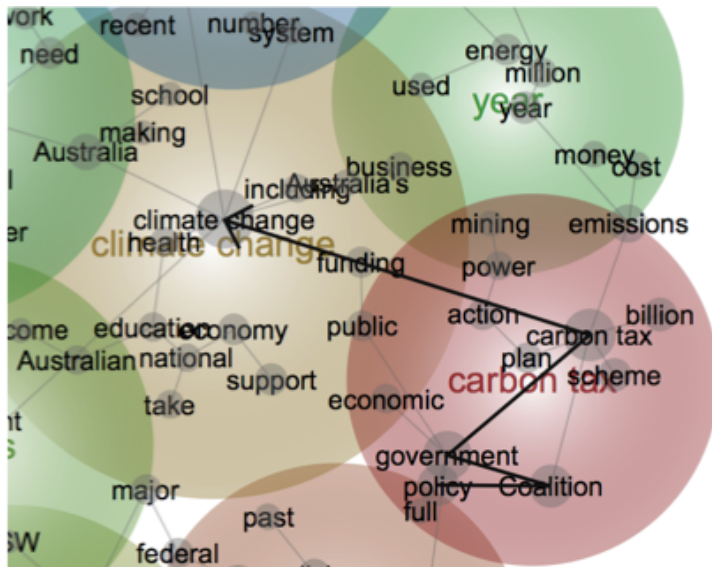
Figs 5: Pathway between *climate change* and *economy*



Similarly, the pathway between the concepts of policy to climate change is telling (Fig 6). It travels firstly through Coalition before reaching government, then to carbon tax and onto climate change. An ‘eyeballing’ of both the sample text extracts and the related thesaurus terms shows that it is being discussed usually in terms of the political problems it has created for the Gillard and Rudd governments, the Coalition’s stated promise to repeal it once in government as well as a range of comments raising doubts about both the effectiveness and costs of the alternative Direct Action policy. Again what is notable in this corpus is the negative connection between carbon tax and policy, rather than any positive or substantial debate about the alternate positive impact of Direct Action. It is a policy which has been, (and continues to be), posited without any substantial argument about how it will be more effective than either an ETS or a carbon tax.

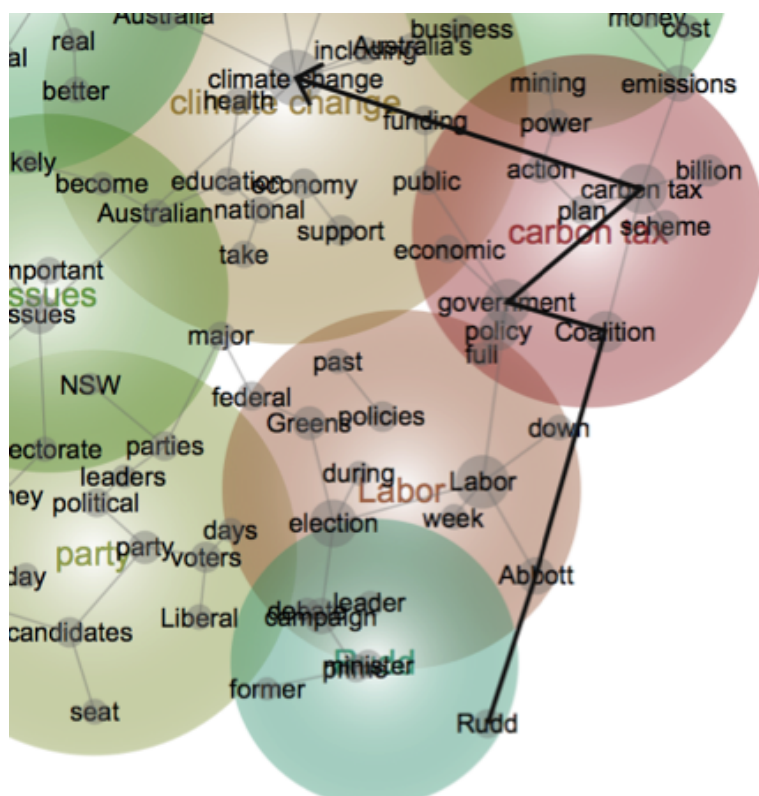
An additional pathway was also drawn between the concepts *policy* and *emissions* as I was interested to see how these were connected. It travels via the *Greens* concept but not via *Labor* (Fig 6). I read this to indicate that the problem the carbon tax policy was developed to mitigate (*emissions*) is more closely related in the text to the third major political party, the Greens, with whom Julia Gillard had to negotiate in order to form her minority government in 2010. Interestingly, the *emissions* concept is also located on the perimeter of the ‘carbon tax’ theme indicating that this concept is peripheral: the Abbott rhetoric of subsuming the debate in terms of the frame of economic progress and waste is dominant as indicated in his campaign speech where he says: ‘So that everyone can get ahead. We’ll scrap the carbon tax, we’ll end the waste, we’ll stop the boats and we’ll build the roads of the 21st century’ (Abbott, 2013a).

Figs 6 & 7: Pathways between *policy* and *climate change* and *policy* and *emissions*



Finally, what is notable about these connections, (and there are many more that could be discussed), is the distance of both Labor in general, and Rudd in particular, from these concepts in the text. In fact when the theme size is set at 33%, even though Rudd has the 9th most significant theme (see Fig 3), his concept is located on the outside perimeter of the 'Rudd' theme bubble and has a direct pathway to the *climate change* concept only via *Abbott* and *carbon tax* (Fig 8). *Abbott* is closer than *Rudd* to the *climate change* concept because he is controlling the narrative.

Fig 8: Pathway between *Rudd* and *climate change*



The power of dominant framing

The question that this paper set out to explore was the extent to which climate change, as both a policy and a problem, was ‘missing in action’ in the political debate during the 2013 Australian federal election. As shown in Fig 1, there were significantly fewer mainstream news stories and references to climate change during 2013 in comparison with the two previous elections. Although quantity does not necessarily equate to either substance or influence, as initial indicator it is interesting.

Another important indicator of how a political party wishes to frame its election strategy and the policy elements upon which it wishes the electorate to focus, is the campaign launch speech. In Rudd’s speech, climate change was only afforded a cursory reference, and then with reference to Abbott. While he is correct to say that Abbott’s policy has not been explained, he makes no attempt to argue for the relative merits of Labor’s policy, nor the consequences of inaction. Abbott, for his part, merely reiterates his mantra about the carbon tax being bad for the economy, curiously arguing, as he has done before and since, that he is a conservationist at heart (Hurst, 2014). Again, both speeches focus primarily on the importance of the economy and economic growth. The relationship between the long-term impacts of climate change on economic growth, on tourism, on agriculture and on health, to name a few, was ignored. The fact that climate change is not merely an environmental problem but one with significant economic ramifications, has been variously argued from Sir Nicholas Stern (2007) to Australia’s Professor Ross Garnaut (2008).

While the relative absence of both political and media attention to this important topic during the election is telling, the focus of what reporting there was about climate change and policy during the election tells a more nuanced story. The Leximancer analysis, both quantitatively and qualitatively, illustrates that what reference there was to climate change policy and issues are largely discursively constructed in terms of the carbon tax by all sides of politics, including the Greens. Abbott’s spectacular success during the Gillard years in myopically framing the carbon pricing scheme as a ‘tax’, by coupling it with Gillard’s so-called ‘lie’ (Bacon, 2013), the ‘illegitimacy’ of both her ascension to the prime ministership and of her minority government and its ‘ineptitude’, enabled him to effectively control the language and frame of the debate. The media mostly played Abbott’s tune. The constant ‘sideshow’ which ex-Rudd minister Lindsay Tanner (2011) noted with respect to the relationship between politicians and the media, worked to distract the focus of media coverage from the actual policy objective and the massive nature of the problem. The sheer intensity with which Abbott pursued the issue, created an environment in which the politics became more newsworthy than the issue itself. Both Labor and the Greens, by falling into the Coalition’s frame, were politically outmaneuvered and unable to ‘sell’ the policy’s environmental purpose.

The extent to which ‘the conservative frame’ as Lakoff (2010) describes it, was dominant, is evidenced by both the language of the debate as I’ve noted, and the political strategies employed. The perception that the carbon tax policy was politically ‘toxic’ and that the broader concern about climate change among voters had waned,

was reflected in the reinstated Rudd's strategy to immediately neutralise Abbott's 'axe the tax' line of attack by promising to move one year earlier than Labor had originally intended to an emissions trading scheme. While the potential impact of this plan, which moved from a fixed price on carbon to one aligned with the European price, was debatable (as the European price remained low), Rudd also failed to explain how it differed from the existing plan or why it would be more effective. The effect was to merely reinforce the perception that the carbon tax was a bad thing and something associated with the woman who usurped him as prime minister: the politics took precedence over the objectives of the policy in the political discourse.

In a broader sense, resistance to the carbon tax as a means of controlling greenhouse gas emissions was also exacerbated by the prominence given in the conservative media to climate change denialism in particular (Bacon, 2011; Manne, 2011) and the delegitimisation of science in general (Nelson, 2004). The repeated use of the word 'tax' had the effect of creating and reinforcing the perception that the policy was aimed at individuals rather than at carbon polluting companies. Again Labor's decision after 2010 to focus their message on 'household assistance', with only minimal mention of the ultimate purpose or rationale for the policy, played into the 'tax' frame. For example, of the 14 points listed in the table of contents of a booklet titled 'What a carbon price means for you' (Australian Government, 2011) sent out to all households prior to the tabling of the Clean Energy Bill, only two referred to cutting carbon pollution: the remaining 12 referred to assistance, tax cuts and saving money. While the Gillard Labor government's preferred descriptor was 'carbon pricing', the then Minister for Climate Change, Greg Combet, agreed under questioning that it would 'operate like a carbon tax' (Peacock, 2011). In the days after the election defeat, Gillard herself admitted the importance of this politically when she wrote:

“ I erred by not contesting the label “tax” for the fixed price period of the emissions trading scheme I introduced. I feared the media would end up playing constant silly word games with me, trying to get me to say the word “tax”. I wanted to be on the substance of the policy, not playing “gotcha”. But I made the wrong choice and, politically, it hurt me terribly (Gillard, 2013). ”

Lakoff (2008, 2010) argues that 'conservative frames' have become so reified via the discourse of 'market fundamentalism' that competing 'progressive frames' are difficult to contest. Conservative frames tend to conceptualise the 'environment' or natural world in terms of the 'market', an external entity that always operates more effectively (according to the conservative worldview) if left to its own devices without government interference. Taxes, in the populist sense, are an impost, instruments that penalise personal freedoms and stifle entrepreneurial initiative. They are increasingly associated with anti-government suspicions, a trend noted by a range of political analysts (for example see Burchell & Leigh, 2002; Faulkner, 2005; Goot, 2002; Mair, 2013). Former ALP leader Mark Latham observes in the introduction to his most recent book that:

“ Whereas citizens once passively delegated authority to political institutions, they now distrust the system's work and motivations (Latham, 2014, p. 13). ”

In such an environment, factors such as Gillard's so-called carbon tax 'lie', Rudd's perceived reticence to more actively agitate for a solution to the 'greatest moral challenge of a generation', along with the framing of climate change advocacy as a form of 'secular religion' (McKewon, 2012) or left wing, anti-capitalist conspiracy (e.g. Plimer, 2009), these frames more easily became dominant.

What do the voters of Lindsay think?

In the case of public support for climate change action in the lead up to the 2013 election, to what extent did strategists from both sides misread an apparent antipathy to the 'carbon tax' as framed by Tony Abbott, with a declining public concern about climate change impacts more broadly? Were they, as Jonathan Green (2013, p. 141) has asserted in relation to dealing with climate change, 'timid and reactive to opinion'? And whose opinions did they consider? A comparison of various polls presents a complex picture. For example, in their 'Climate of the Nation' report (2013), *The Climate Institute* noted a change in attitudes since their previous poll in 2012 and reported that in 2013 two thirds of Australians were genuinely worried about the cost impacts of extreme weather and climate change. They also noted however that while climate change was not perceived as a major issue during the election, and that broadly the carbon tax policy was not popular, its repeal was not a major reason for voting for the Coalition. This conclusion is also supported by two Lowy polls on climate change (Lowy Institute, 2013, 2014) which show a gradually rising level of support for the question 'Global warming is a serious and pressing problem. We should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs'. The predicted 'wreaking ball' to the economy (Griffiths, 2012) which according to Tony Abbott would wipe the South Australian mining town of Whyalla 'off the map' (Pedler, 2011), did not eventuate, and while the majority of those polled in November 2012 still opposed the carbon tax, they agreed that it had made no difference to their lives (Coorey, 2012).

The context of the polls is important. Pietsch and McAllister (2010) for example have argued that issues such as health and education tend to relegate the environment to a 'second order election issue', a contention borne out by the results of the ABC's (2013) 'Vote Compass' survey which noted 'the economy' as being the most important issue for voters. One interpretation is that this result is indicative of the extent to which Labor under Rudd had retreated even further from commitment to greenhouse gas abatement policies because of the success of the Coalition's attacks, and because strategists no longer believed it was an electorally popular concern. Another is that it is a measure of the increasingly symbiotic relationship between political media managers and journalists (Louw, 2010; Savage & Tiffen, 2007; Stockwell, 2005; Ward, 1991, 2007), creating a form of 'feedback loop' that served to reinforce the prevailing views of those wishing to assert their power by appearing to control the message. This phenomenon has previously been discussed in relationship to both the 2010 coup against Rudd (Hodge & Matthews, 2011) and his return to the leadership in June 2013 (Walsh, 2013).

The extent to which political action in Australia and more broadly is increasingly poll driven has been noted in analyses of the so-called 'malaise' of Australian politics of the past decade (for example Megalogenis, 2010; Mills & Tiffen, 2012; Tanner, 2011; Ward, 2007). Kevin Rudd reportedly rarely made an announcement without one eye on the media (Button, 2013), and in their forensic analyses of both the 2010 and 2013 elections, journalists Barrie Cassidy (2010) and Jonathan Green (2013) document the extent to which opinion polls in marginal seats were a significant driver in the election strategies of both major parties.

The complexity of climate change as an issue – and of communicating the nuances of alternative policies – is also a problem. An analysis of public opinion data in Australia collected in late 2008 about the introduction of an emissions trading scheme (Pietsch & McAllister, 2010), notes that climate change, as a specialised scientific and public policy issue, is hugely problematic for national governments upon whom the onus for significant action falls in the absence or failure of global movements. This is because they are they are 'circumscribed in the action they can take by the views of the public' (p. 218), particularly as significant action requires that individuals and businesses change long established patterns of behaviour. Even so, their analysis concluded that at this time, 'while many Australians are willing to pay for environmental protection, a large majority remains to be convinced of the merits of an ETS' (p. 232).

In recent years, opinion polls have become an increasingly prominent part of both political strategy and reporting in Australia and elsewhere. With respect to their impact on public opinion more broadly, some argue that their sheer ubiquity means that they can 'manufacture collective sentiment', allowing them to take on a life of their own and 'dictate public opinion rather than reflect it' (Holmes, 2013). This is particularly the case when party leaders lose favour, as the role of polls in the Rudd/Gillard leadership tussle demonstrated (Hodge & Matthews, 2011; Walsh, 2013). Further, blogger and political analyst Peter Brent (2014b) points to the artificial nature of poll results taken months or years out from an election posited on the hypothetical question 'if an election were held this weekend ...' arguing that they serve to fill the columns of newspapers and news broadcasts rather than having any real statistical meaning.

The extent to which polls are able to accurately reflect and measure the views of a constituent sample, and whether or not 'public opinion' can be said to exist as a heterogeneous and measurable concept, has been variously debated (Blumer, 1948; Bourdieu, 1979). Bourdieu, for example, makes the point that polls are inadequate mechanisms because of the simplistic and false assumptions upon which they are based:

“ It imposes the idea for instance, than in any given assembly of people there can be found a public opinion, which would be something like the average of all the opinions or the average opinion. The 'public opinion' which is stated on the front page of the newspapers in terms of percentages (60% of the French are in favour of ...) is a pure and simple artifact whose function is to conceal the fact that the state of opinion at any given moment is a system of forces, tensions, and that there is nothing more inadequate than a percentage to represent the state of opinion (1979, p. 125). ”

In the case of polls on climate change policy in Australia, Peter Brent (2014a) notes the susceptibility of the responses by survey respondents to the manner in which a question is worded, a conclusion that should caution against giving undue and uncritical weight to some surveys:

“ When opinion pollsters ask Australians if the Labor opposition should allow the government to abolish the 'carbon tax', they tend to respond in the affirmative. After all, it was a high-profile promise taken to last year's election. But when surveyed about their own policy preferences, their responses are susceptible to how the question is worded (Brent, 2014a). ”

Further, a study by Leviston et al (2013) also concluded that opinions about the existence and causes of climate change in Australia were subject to 'strong false consensus effects' and were particularly influenced by 'systemic biases in media reporting [that] can lead to collective distortions about the popularity of certain opinions' (p. 334). In other words, people tend to overestimate the number of people who reject the existence of climate change in the broader community, and this in turn can impact on their own espoused views. Add to this a growing sense of antipathy towards political parties broadly, and the incumbent government in particular, as well as the 'cognitive impact' (Lewandowsky, 2011) on opinion by what some see as a concerted campaign of misrepresentation of the science in mainstream media (Bacon, 2013; Manne, 2012), and the usefulness of polls as the basis of policy, is questionable. This is further exacerbated in the media, as Boykoff and Boykoff (2004, 2007) have argued, by 'the norm of balanced reporting'. They conclude that:

“ ... the prestige press's adherence to balance actually leads to biased coverage of both anthropogenic contributions to global warming and resultant action (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, p. 125). ”

The impact, according to Lewandowsky (2011), is that:

“ ... the Australian media have failed the public by creating a phoney debate about climate science that is largely absent from the peer-reviewed literature, where real scientific debates take place. ”

Conclusion

A complex range of factors can be seen to have contributed to the 'greatest moral challenge of our generation' being politically 'missing in action' during the 2013 Australian federal election, despite an apparent growing level of general public concern about the need for action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The contradictions between these two positions would indicate that the manner in which the political debate had been narrowly framed, influenced both the tenor and substance of the news reporting, as well as the perceptions of the efficacy of the policy itself. Both Rudd and Gillard chose to construct their carbon pricing policy defenses within Abbott's 'tax' frame, giving it added power and credence. The role of the framing of media coverage of the politics, not to mention the science, of climate change, while not the only factor, was very important in influencing the public's attitudes as measured by the polls and focus groups, and by extension the manner in which policies were framed. With increasingly depleted newsroom resources, and a preference for reporting the drama of the political contest played out daily in Canberra, the media contributed to the narrow frame of the debate. Despite increasing evidence that the prophesied impacts of global warming are already being felt, it would seem that both major political parties chose the 'small target' approach to climate change policy for different reasons. The 'diabolical challenge' to which Ross Garnaut (AAP, 2008) referred, was very much evident in the enactment of this campaign.

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