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Power and the Passion: A Positioning Analysis of the Electricity Privatisation Debate in the 2015 NSW State Election

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Abstract

The primary aim of this research was to explore the public relations positioning used in the debate over electricity privatisation in the 2015 NSW state election. Guided by positioning analysing as proposed by Harré and Slocum (2003) and James (2014), this research sought to not only identify acts of positioning, but also to evaluate their effectiveness. In this study, a sample of speeches and interviews by NSW Premier Mike Baird and Opposition Leader Luke Foley were analysed. Both political leaders sought to engage in positioning around the topic of electricity privatisation for a strategic purpose. The chosen texts were analysed using both critical discourse analysis and the Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations (James, 2014). The research findings revealed that Luke Foley's goal was to position electricity privatisation as both bad for NSW and the single biggest issue in the election. Conversely, Mike Baird sought to position the issue as good for NSW but did not give it prominence through the campaign. The research found that whilst there was strategic merit in both of these positioning strategies, Mike Baird was more successful in occupying his desired positions. Findings and analysis also highlighted the integral role of the local moral order in public relations positioning. It was suggested in this study that even if congruence between a position, speech act and storyline is achieved, the position will be unviable if the individual didn't have the right to position in the first place.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the ways in which strategic discursive positioning was used in the debate over electricity privatisation during the 2015 election in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW). The NSW Liberal Party, led by Mike Baird, was seeking a mandate to partially lease the publically owned electricity distribution networks to private enterprise for 99 years. The NSW Labor Party, led by Luke Foley, was opposed to the plan. The application of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) allowed for the examination of how positioning was used within acts of public relations to create meaning with intended audiences. This research applied the Conceptual Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations as developed for positioning analysis by James (2014) as well as a critical discourse analysis method (Hucken, 1997) to look at not only the positions taken and assigned by the two leaders, but also their perceived effectiveness. The study aimed to better understand the use of strategic positioning in the electricity privatisation debate.

Political backdrop

The political context in which the 2015 NSW election campaign took place was tumultuous and complex. The Labor Party suffered a landslide defeat at the 2011 election to the Liberal Party, led by Barry O'Farrell. After the election defeat, John Robertson became Leader of the Opposition in March 2011. He resigned from this position in December 2014 after it was revealed that he wrote a character reference for Man Haron Monis, who later became the perpetrator of the 2014 Lindt Cafe hostage crisis (Nicholls & Robertson, 2014). Luke Foley was elected by the Labor caucus and became Opposition Leader in January 2015. The timing of this is important as it only gave him two months as Opposition Leader before the 2015 election campaign. Premier Barry O'Farrell was also forced to resign after it was revealed at the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) that he failed to declare a gift (Grattan, 2014). NSW Treasurer Mike Baird succeeded Barry O'Farrell as NSW Premier in April 2014.

The issue of electricity privatisation has been controversial and divisive in NSW politics since first being mooted in 1997 (Chester, 2015). The issue has caused fractures within the NSW Labor Party to the point of former Premier, Morris Iemma lost the leadership due to his plan to privatise the electricity generators (Salusinkzy, 2012). On becoming Premier, Mike Baird signalled his intention to partially lease the state's electricity distribution networks to private firms. The Labor party under John Robertson and then Luke Foley were staunchly opposed to the plan.

Literature review

A small but growing body of research (James 2011, 2014, 2015; Wise & James 2013, Leitch & Motion 2010; Tsetsura, 2012; Wise, 2015; Zerfass, Verčič & Weisenberg, 2016) is starting to look at the application of positioning theory to public relations. A key tenet of positioning theory is that 'not everyone involved in a social episode has equal rights and duties to perform particular kinds of meaningful actions at that moment and with those people,' (Harré, 2012, p. 193). A social constructionist approach, the original application of positioning theory was developed in the context of gender studies and human interactions (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). The theory has since been widely adapted to a diverse range of disciplines (James, 2015). This recent addition to public relations scholarship has informed the focus of this research project. Zerfass, (2008, p. 3822), stated that positioning is:

...an essential concept in communication management, public relations and marketing communication. The process of positioning includes identifying, defining and managing the perception relevant audiences have of a particular organisation, product, person or idea.

However, applying positioning theory, one can see that positioning in public relations and communication management is more complex, being discursively constructed and focused on rights, duties and the local moral orders in operation at the sites of positioning (James, 2014). Zerfass et al (2016) have recently equated such an approach with framing theory but this is incorrect. Although James discussed the application of framing in the context of storylines to support positioning, positioning theory is not framing theory. It has its origins in the field of social psychology and is to do with "how people use words (and discourses of all types) to locate themselves and others," (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 2), and has subsequently been adapted to public relations.

Continuing with Moghaddam and Harré's definition, positioning is 'an act by which someone has been positioned by others or has positioned himself or herself' (2010, p. 9). 'Positioning' is the term given to the actions that are taken to successfully occupy a position and from here, 'the possibilities for action are established or in some cases denied' (James 2014, p. 19). In other words, within acts of positioning there are socio-culturally specific systems of rights, duties and obligations that both constrain and enable what can be done in certain situations (James 2015; Wise & James, 2013). According to Moghaddam and Harré, (2010) this moral order is comprised of rights and duties that exist as part of the system of beliefs in which people interpret and create meaning. This 'system of beliefs' will have already determined much of the context for any positioning episode in train. The work of positioning theorist, Baert (2015, p. 174), suggests this includes factors such as an individual or entity's established status or positioning within a field; what is happening to other individuals/entities, as shifts in the positioning of others affects both our intended positioning of others and self-positioning; and, the actual effects in terms of positioning depend on the 'socio-political context' and the 'historically rooted sensitivities' in which positioning activities takes place. These local moral orders determine 'who can use a certain discourse mode' (Harré 2012, p. 193), a point that is central to the conceptualisation of positioning theory to public relations.

A fundamental concept of positioning theory as developed by Harré and van Langenhove (1999), is the 'positioning triangle'. The triangle has three mutually determining vertices of *position* – *speech act* – *storylines* (James, 2014). The mutually determining relationship between the three vertices manifests when there is a change in one of these points. The theory states that when there is a change in one of the vertices, for example the position, the two other vertices must inevitably change if positioning is to be achieved. When the three

points of the triangle are consistent and aligned, the positioning triangle is said to be in 'dynamic stability' (Harré van Langenhove 1999, p. 10), which is required for 'effective positioning to be achieved' (James 2015, p. 34). The three vertices of *position*, *speech act* and *storylines* are an integral part of the Conceptual Framework for Intentional Positioning, as developed by James (2014).

Positioning theory in public relations

This research has used James (2014) conceptual framework for positioning analysis, which was drawn from Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) work on positioning in social psychology. When viewed through the prism of positioning theory, James conceptualises public relations as:

A process whereby discursive positions are actively negotiated and achieved, rather than as a prescriptive technique where a pre-existing position is merely occupied (2015, p. 36).

James built on the work of Harré and van Langenhove (1999) in defining a public relations position as:

A point of intentional representation discursively constructed for the purposes of achieving an intended outcome, and from where possibilities for action are established, or in some cases denied, in terms of the local moral order wherein the public relations activity is taking place (2014, p. 34).

According to James (2015), when an organisation is engaged in public relations positioning, it is purposively attempting to facilitate meaning making. Taking this further, "they are working to actively construct a social world – a social world that most often facilitates the achievement of their organisational goal," (James 2015, p. 38). A key feature of James' work in adapting positioning theory to public relations was the development of the Provisional Conceptual Framework for Positioning in Public Relations (2010, 2011) which continues to evolve and iterate as it is further investigated (e.g. James, 2014; Wise and James, 2013; Wise, 2015).

Research approach

The following research questions informed this qualitative research:

RQ1: What positions were taken or assigned by Luke Foley and Mike Baird on electricity privatisation during the 2015 election campaign?

RQ2: How were these positions enacted and supported?

RQ3: How effective were the two leaders in their positioning efforts?

A sample of six texts was chosen to examine the positioning of Luke Foley and Mike Baird on the issue of electricity privatisation. This research analysed the transcripts of four speeches (two delivered by each leader during the 2015 NSW election campaign):

- Mike Baird Campaign Launch 21/03/2015
- Mike Baird campaign speech 21/03/2015
- Luke Foley election launch speech 01/03/2015
- Luke Foley campaign speech 22/03/2015

The decision to use speeches is based on the assumption that public relations practitioners would have played a key role in their construction (Hudson, 2004). In addition to the speeches, one interview given by each leader to prominent journalists was also analysed. The texts were analysed using qualitative methods of positioning analysis and critical discourse analysis. Whilst it is acknowledged that there is not a single prescribed method of critical discourse analysis, this research has applied the approach outlined by Huckin (1997). Speech and interview transcripts were selected according to specific criteria, i.e. texts occurred during the election campaign, were in the public domain and included reference to one or more of the following terms: *privatisation*, *leasing*, *electricity*, *poles*, *wires*, *assets and sales*. The size of the sample could be considered a limitation of this study. A larger study may have examined more acts of positioning across the campaign and also considered the audiences that each candidate was addressing, and what impact this may have had on the positioning. However, on balance, the decision to undertake a deep and detailed analysis of only the campaign launch speeches of both leaders, which were significant in length and covered a diverse range of topics, delivered deep insights into how and why public relations positioning was achieved.

Applying the conceptual framework for intentional positioning in public relations

James developed the Positioning Framework as a:

...heuristic for analysis of public relations activities and ... as a practical framework for designing positioning strategies in public relations programs and campaigns' (Wise and James 2013, p. 331).

The Framework adopts the positioning triangle which was put forward by van Langenhove and Harré (1999) and adds three specific domains: *Positioning goal domain*, *positioning type domain*, and *the strategic pre-positioning domain* (James, 2014). The four domains of the Framework in detail are:

Positioning goal domain

The 'positioning goal domain', is related to the desire of the organisation to achieve a specific goal that the position taken may achieve.

Positioning type domain

The four types of intentional positioning developed by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) are:

- Situations of deliberate self-positioning: where an organisation desires to occupy a position for a specific purpose.
- Situations of forced self-positioning: where external forces not within the organisation's control force a repositioning of itself.
- Situations of deliberate positioning of others: where an organisation deliberately positions another organisation for a specific purpose; and
- Situations of forced positioning of others: where external forces a positioning of another organisation.

Strategic pre-positioning domain

This concept was incorporated into the Framework after a revision of the provisional framework (James, 2011). The intentional co-construction of factors and elements, such as the allocation of particular attributes to an entity, that would influence the environment in which the positioning would be taking place, was added to the framework.

Positioning triangle domain

The positioning triangle domain considers how the three vertices interact for successful positioning (Wise & James, 2013), as each of vertices is mutually defined and interdependent (James, 2014). According to positioning theory, once an organisation determines its desired positioning, that position needs to be enacted so it becomes known to its intended audience or publics (James 2014; Wise & James 2013). The second vertex of the positioning triangle has significant connections to speech act theory, a key tenet of which is the belief that "all utterances have a meaning and a force (Potter and Wetherell 1987, p. 17). Positioning theorists refer to the force of utterances as 'social force' and for James 'the social force of speech acts is central to positioning theory' (2014, p. 52). Drawing on Searle's (1979) categories of speech acts, it is evident how a social constructed reality may be created using words, acts and images that have 'social force' (James, 2014). Searle's (1979) five categories of speech acts are:

- Assertives: we tell people how things are
- Directives: we trying and get them to do things
- Commissives: we commit ourselves to doing things
- Expressives: we express our feelings and attitudes
- Declaratives: we bring about change in the world through our utterances

Finally, the third vertex of the positioning triangle is the storylines used to support the positioning. This is where an organisation, through its storylines, attempts to strategically co-construct meaning (James, 2014). These storylines, often promulgated through key messages across transmedia platforms, must relate to the desired position and the speech acts for dynamic stability to be achieved, or maintained.

Findings

Finding One: A catalogue of positions were taken and assigned by Mike Baird and Luke Foley and supported through speech acts and storylines.

When an organisation is engaged in public relations positioning, 'they are working to actively construct a social world – a social world that most often facilitates the achievement of their organisational goal' (James 2015, p. 38). The strategic and purposeful nature of public relations positioning is important to remember when analysing the discursive positioning of Mike Baird and Luke Foley. Applying the positioning type domain is particularly useful as it allows the researcher to identify instances where an individual or organisation has been proactive in their positioning efforts, or reactive as they attempt to defend their position or reposition entirely. This research has identified three key desired positions of both Mike Baird and Luke Foley that were evident throughout the texts. These positions were analysed in the context of the positioning goal domain as well as the positioning type domain (James, 2014). In conceptualising Positioning Theory to Public Relations, James (2014) identified four types of positioning: *Situations of deliberate self-positioning; Situations of forced self-positioning; Situations of deliberate positioning of others; and Situations of forced positioning of others* (James, 2014). The positions identified are as follows:

Mike Baird

1. Deliberate positioning of Labor by Mike Baird as deceitful and dishonest.

The enactment of this position was evident in the following assertive speech acts. The social force behind an assertive speech act is to state the way things are – that is, to shape the way people perceive reality/construct reality (Searle 1979; James 2014). The context of this position was most evident around the storylines of electricity privatisation. Examples of speech acts used to enact this position are:

Baird: It's very easy to run a scare campaign against it. And Labor have done it very well.

Baird: But what's very clear is that this campaign is a scare – it's not about a vision, it's about a scare – [and] they will be running that very hard.

2. Deliberate positioning by Mike Baird of asset leasing as good for New South Wales

Mike Baird makes a semantic distinction to Luke Foley by referring to his plan for the electricity networks as 'asset leasing'. Baird deliberately positioned the leasing of the electricity networks as a positive for NSW, which he enacted through the speech acts:

Baird: Everyone in Macquarie Street knows that this is the right thing to do terms of leasing the poles and wires business, they know it's the right thing to do.

Baird: The point is that \$20 billion of our future vision will be funded by the lease of less than half the state's electricity networks.

Baird uses assertive speech acts to affirm from his perspective the subjective reality that asset leasing is unquestionably good for NSW. To strengthen this position, Baird uses the commissive speech act to commit himself and his government to using the profits to build publically owned assets.

3. Forced self-positioning of asset leasing as good for New South Wales

The positioning analysis yielded examples of deliberate self-positioning by Baird, as well as forced self-positioning, i.e. being forced by Foley's speech acts on his positioning efforts, on the issue of asset leasing. The previous position was enacted using proactive speech acts whilst the following enacting speech acts appear to be reactive:

Baird: But [they] can paint a story that says privatisation is not in the state's interests, because they try and pretend on matters such as service reliability and pricing that the private sector means that things are going to get worse.

The use of assertive speech acts here is classified as forced self-positioning as they are in response to challenges to Baird's position on electricity privatisation from Foley and others.

Luke Foley

The three key positions identified for Luke Foley were:

1. *Deliberate positioning by Foley of electricity privatisation as bad for NSW*

Foley: This isn't economic reform. It's a garage sale. He just wants to flog it off to the highest bidder to fund his extravagant promises.

Foley: Mr Baird is prepared to hurt the state's finances in the long run just to fund his extravagant promises to escape through next Saturday's election.

This act of deliberate positioning of electricity privatisation as bad for NSW was Foley's central position during the election campaign. The position was enacted through *assertive* speech acts.

2. *Deliberate positioning of Mike Baird as dishonest and untrustworthy*

This position which was enacted using the following *assertive* speech acts was designed to position Mike Baird as being dishonest and untrustworthy on the issue of electricity privatisation.

Foley: And if anything makes clear the Liberals are lying to NSW to say they are protecting them from privatisation, it's their plan, and the coalition parties plan to sell the state's transmission network.

Foley: Mr Baird promises \$2 billion dollars of additional investment in schools and hospitals only if you succumb to the blackmail and agree to your electricity network being privatised.

From a strategic perspective, if Foley was successfully able to hold and maintain this position that Baird is dishonest on this issue, it would have been hoped that this would have tainted voters' views of Baird on other issues. Evident in the texts analysed of Luke Foley to support his positioning of Baird as dishonest and deceitful was the invoking of discourses of criminality. These are reflected in the speech acts:

Foley: Mr Baird will send the profits to a private earner and permanently rob the state of the funds it needs to properly service the community.

Foley: They were leant on by the Liberals this week to change their advice that said; the state will permanently be robbed of finances, of revenue in form of dividends of the state's electricity companies and the state's finances will be worse off as a result.

Foley: Mr Baird promises \$2 billion dollars of additional investment in schools and hospitals only if you succumb to the blackmail and agree to your electricity network being privatised.

Foley: The conservatives are blackmailing communities around the state for basic infrastructure needs – and my opponent won't answer the most basic questions.

These discourses were used to support Luke Foley's position on electricity privatisation and also Mike Baird personally. The invoking of criminal discourses within assertive speech acts suggests that Foley was attempting to shape certain aspects of the social world (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, p.6) with his intended audience. By associating Mike Baird with these discourses of criminality and deceit, Foley is seeking to position Baird within the local moral order as not having the right to privatise the electricity networks:

Foley: This extraordinary fixation on getting rid of a network which sends power into every home and business in this state is propped up by so-called 'asset recycling' bribes from the Federal Government.

This assertive speech act not only invokes the aforementioned discourses but also links Mike Baird to the unpopular Abbott government (Farr, 2015).

3. *Deliberate positioning of Labor as renewed and reformed*

This research also found that Luke Foley deliberately self-positioned himself and his party as having changed and renewed. The context of this positioning is important which was where critical discourse analysis was particularly useful. The 'contextualised interpretation' step of Huckin's (1997) framework for critical discourse analysis was crucial in understanding the contextual motivations to Foley's positioning. The NSW Labor party lost the 2011 election in a landslide (Barlow, 2011) and senior figures came under criticism for allegations of

criminality and wrongdoing at the Independent Commission Against Corruption (Clark, 2014). For Luke Foley, the positioning goal can be seen as wanting to construct the social reality that Labor has learnt its lessons and is ready to govern. The following speech acts were used to enact this positioning:

Foley: The truth is the people of NSW, who entrusted us with government for 16 years, did not leave us. We left them.

Foley: For NSW Labor, the last four years has been a journey back to the people; a journey back to our origins, to find our best self.

Foley: We had to examine ourselves, find humility, change – and return home. We had to change – and we have.

Finding Two: Luke Foley positioned electricity privatisation as the single biggest issue in the 2015 NSW election.

Evident in all of Luke Foley's speeches was the positioning of electricity privatisation as the most important issue of the election campaign. This position was not only evident in the number of speech acts and storylines used, but was explicitly stated by Foley during the campaign:

Foley: So this election will be a referendum on electricity privatisation in this state

Foley: Friends what's on the line in this election perhaps above everything else is the future of the state's electricity network

These *assertive* speech acts were used by Foley to construct with his audience the notion that the election will be decided on the issue of electricity privatisation. By attempting to make it the most important election issue, Foley is assuming the right to give it prominence during the campaign as well as the duty for Baird to do the same. This unambiguous positioning was highlighted in the Foley's March 3 interview with Channel 9 journalist, Peter Overton:

Peter Overton: Our conversation today keeps coming back to the privatisation of the electricity networks. Are you relying on this protest vote to get you across the line?

Luke Foley: It's not about a protest, I want to save the electricity network.

Peter Overton: Yeah, but it's about hammering the message, that's your strategy.

Luke Foley: It's a central message, it's no small matter Pete. This election will decide once and for all whether the state's essential electricity network is sold off or remains in public hands.

Again, Foley uses *assertive* speech acts to emphasise the gravity of privatisation in the election campaign. From a strategic positioning perspective, Luke Foley's positioning goal was for the voters of NSW to vote based on their opinions of electricity privatisation. The strategic benefit of this position is predicated on whether Foley can also successfully position electricity privatisation as bad for NSW.

Finding Three: Mike Baird was able to maintain congruence between his positioning, speech acts and storylines more successfully than Luke Foley

Findings one and two established that both Mike Baird and Luke Foley employed a range of positioning, speech acts and storylines during the election campaign. The success of positioning in public relations is only achieved when all three vertices of position, speech acts and storylines align in 'dynamic stability' (James 2014, p. 10). Positioning analysis found that Mike Baird was able to maintain 'dynamic stability' far more successfully than Luke Foley on the issue of privatisation. While both leaders were seen to successfully enact their desired positions using speech acts and supporting storylines, Foley was not able to successfully reposition when challenged. The storyline promulgated by Foley that electricity privatisation would drive up power prices threatened to disrupt Baird's position that privatising the networks was good for NSW consumers. In an act of forced self-positioning, which can be viewed as being forced into a discursive position by another that results in having to take action to favourably re-position, Mike Baird addressed the assertion that prices will rise under his plan with the *assertive and commissive* speech acts:

Mike Baird: The truth acknowledged by everyone except Labor and its union masters is that our transaction will push electricity prices down, not up.

Mike Baird: And to hammer the final nail in the coffin of the scare campaign, we've issued a price guarantee that will be overseen by the champion of the consumer, Professor Alan Felds.

Here, Mike Baird is engaging in forced-self positioning by responding to Labor's claims that privatisation will drive up power prices. Foley's positioning of electricity privatisation threatened to disrupt the dynamic stability of Mike Baird's positioning triangle. However, Baird was able to counter this and successfully reposition using further proof points at the storyline positioning triangle vertex and committing (*commissive* speech act) to a price guarantee at the speech act vertex. Positioning theory suggests that for Luke Foley's position to be viable and to maintain the dynamic stability of his positioning triangle, he would be obligated to reposition by addressing Baird's claims. Analysis showed that Foley did not attempt to reposition and it is suggested that this significantly damaged his efforts to position himself as a viable choice for leader of NSW.

Analysis and discussion

This research has demonstrated that the issue of electricity privatisation dominated the positioning efforts of both leaders during the 2015 NSW election campaign. Both Luke Foley and Mike Baird sought to strategically position the other as being dishonest and deceitful on the issue of electricity privatisation. These positions were explicitly enacted through various speech acts and supporting storylines/proof points. Here, it is important to remember James' definition of a public relations position where 'possibilities for action are established, or in some cases denied, in terms of the local moral order(s) wherein the public relations activity is taking place' (2014, p. 19). In the context of James' definition, the positioning goals of the two leaders were to construct a social reality whereby their opponent was seen as deceitful and dishonest. The successful occupation of such a position may constrain the possibilities for action according to the local moral order in operation (James, 2014). Analysing through the positioning goal domain on the Framework suggests that the goal of Foley's positioning efforts was to win the 2015 election rather than change Mike Baird's policy on privatisation. In other words, the strategic positioning goal of Luke Foley was to construct with voters the idea that privatisation is contrary to their best interests, which would have then encouraged them to vote for the Labor Party at the election. Considering that Luke Foley positioned electricity privatisation as bad for NSW and the biggest election issue, the strategic importance of holding this position was perhaps greater than that of Baird.

If Foley could have successfully positioned electricity privatisation as the biggest election issue in the mind of the voters, the impact of also positioning it as bad for the state would have been more impactful. The implications for Baird may have been the denial of rights by the local moral order(s) to position electricity privatisation as good for NSW. This denial of rights by the local order may have manifested in different ways during the political campaign such as adverse opinion polls, negative media coverage and voter backlash. This suggests that there was a significant strategic dividend available to Luke Foley in successfully positioning.

The findings of this research highlighted that Foley's positions on electricity privatisation were sufficiently enacted through speech acts and supported by storylines and proof points. This is consistent with the positioning triangle domain on the framework, which posits that successful positioning is achieved when there 'is a congruence between the position taken, or assigned, the speech acts used to enact it and the storylines used as support' (James 2015, p. 34). However, as James (2014) also suggests, even with sound enactment and supporting strategies, a position will not be viable if it is not underpinned by 'demonstrable proof points and/or if the organisation does not have the right to occupy or seek a position' (p. 86). Moreover, even if an organisation or individual is occupying a seemingly viable position, this does not mean it will not be subject to attempts by others to destabilize this position. This was found to be the case during the campaign.

Positioning analysis revealed significant challenges to Luke Foley's positions by Mike Baird and a contextual analysis in accordance with CDA showed external challenges to Foley's positions. A key storyline used to support Foley's position that privatisation was bad for NSW was that electricity prices would rise as a result. This storyline seemed to have strategic merit given the volatile history of electricity privatisation in NSW (Chester, 2015) and also previous election campaigns. Wise and James (2013) found when analysing the positioning of a Carbon Tax in Australia that then Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, successfully used electricity prices as a storyline against the Tax. The *electricity privatisation will drive up power prices in NSW* storyline offered Foley a strategic benefit during the campaign and may have had a destabilising effect on Baird's campaign. However, this storyline came under pressure during the campaign.

A report released by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) 'Fact Check' website found Luke Foley's assertion that electricity prices would rise under privatisation was "spin" (ABC News, 2015). Further challenging Foley's position was a Liberal Party advertisement featuring former Labor Resources Minister, Martin Ferguson, accusing Labor of being dishonest in their claims over electricity privatisation. These claims by a Labor luminary

presented a significant challenge to the authenticity of Foley's positioning efforts. The price guarantee offered by Mike Baird to be overseen by Professor Alan Felds further destabilised Foley's positioning. Positioning theory suggests that Foley would have needed to reposition in light of these challenges however this was not evident in the speeches and interviews analysed in this research.

It is argued in this research that Baird was able to maintain congruence or dynamic stability in his positioning triangle between his positioning, speech acts and storylines more effectively than Foley. The positioning analysis of Baird's two campaign speeches and interview with journalist, Michelle Grattan, did not reveal incongruence of his positioning triangle domain in any of the identified positions taken. Baird's position in relation to electricity privatisation was challenged by Foley, but Baird was able to effectively reposition with speech acts outlining a price guarantee and supporting proof points. Conversely, when Foley's key election commitment was challenged by Baird and external sources, he was unable to successfully reposition. James suggests that if a storyline was found to be based on untruths, 'this would necessitate changing not only the storyline but also the organisation's actual position and its enactment' (p. 65). Positioning theory posits that an alignment between the three vertices of the positioning triangle must occur for the successful occupation of a position (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

A novel way to explain Luke Foley's inability to effectively position Mike Baird is through the concept of 'mutual radicalization'. Konaev and Moghaddam (2010) explain mutual radicalization as a process whereby hyper aggressive rhetoric by a politician towards external enemies can solidify the internal support of that politician or party. The authors do, however, suggest that aggressive discourse and leadership is placed in a tenuous position when the 'external enemies' do not appear to be hostile. This caveat is particularly relevant to Luke Foley's aggressive positioning of Mike Baird in that the Premier did not take a hostile role during the campaign. The invoking of criminal discourses by Luke Foley to explain Mike Baird's positioning on electricity privatisation was accompanied by the deliberate positioning of Mike Baird as dishonest and untrustworthy. The positioning analysis showed that Baird scarcely referenced Foley and instead gave prominence to his plan for infrastructure and service delivery. The non-hostile role played by Baird was raised during his interview with journalist, Michelle Grattan (2015):

Grattan: Your leadership image is a much softer, more moderate one than the images that either Campbell Newman had or Tony Abbott has now. And your popularity is much higher either than Newman's was or Abbott's is. Do you think that voters these days really are over the aggressive political approach?

Here Grattan was acknowledging Baird's moderate image as well as his personal popularity within the electorate. By aggressively positioning Baird and invoking discourses of criminality, Foley put himself in a precarious position as Baird was not a 'hostile enemy' (Konaev & Moghaddam 2010, p. 168). Accepting Konaev and Moghaddam's premise, Foley did not have the right, within the local moral order (Harré & Slocum, 2003) to position Baird in this way. According to the positioning triangle domain in the Positioning Framework, Foley's position was unviable (James, 2014). This research is the first to apply the concept of mutual radicalization positioning strategy to a domestic political context. James (2014) applied this concept to the positioning around Australia's relationship with Indonesia in the context of Australia's unilateral response to asylum seeker boat arrivals, Operation Sovereign Borders. Whilst this is a novel application of mutual radicalization to the context of domestic political positioning, the concept appears to explain the flaws in Foley's aggressive approach.

The positioning analysis of both leaders' speeches and interviews with journalists highlighted their strategic positioning efforts as well as the supporting speech acts and storylines. A fundamental tenet of positioning theory is the alignment of the vertices on the positioning triangle. This research has demonstrated that Foley failed to maintain this alignment, i.e. the dynamic stability of the positioning triangle, on numerous positions. Conversely, the positioning of Baird did not appear to come under stress and on the occasions that they were challenged, he successfully repositioned.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the various types of positions taken and assigned by NSW Premier Mike Baird and Opposition Leader Luke Foley on the issue of electricity privatisation during 2015 NSW election campaign in Australia. Transcripts from speeches and interviews given by the two leaders during the campaign were analysed using positioning analysis guided by the application of the Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations (James, 2014) and a critical discourse analysis method (Huckin, 1997). The results gave further insights into how discursive public relations positioning is used by organisations to construct meaning with their intended audiences in order to achieve a desired goal. The application of the Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations revealed a catalogue of positions taken and assigned by the two leaders during the election campaign. Consistent with positioning theory, these positions were enacted through speech acts and supported through storylines and key messages.

The position given most prominence by Foley was that electricity privatisation was the single biggest issue during the election campaign. This research suggests that having positioned electricity privatisation as 'bad' for NSW, positioning it as the most important issue had strategic merit. If Foley was able to successfully position privatisation as both bad for NSW and the most important election issue, the electorate may have been more inclined to vote for the Labor Party. It was shown however, that despite successfully enacting and supporting his positions, Foley's positions were disrupted during the campaign. This dynamic stability that occurs when congruence between the position, speech act and storyline was disrupted by flaws in the proof points offered by Foley, external forces challenging his positions and also the strong positioning of Baird.

In contrast, where Baird's positions were challenged on privatisation, he was found to have successfully repositioned with supporting proof points that included a price-guarantee on electricity prices. This damaged a key storyline promulgated by Foley that electricity privatisation would inevitably drive up prices. The conclusion drawn from these findings is that having maintained the dynamic stability of his public relations position more successfully than Foley, he had constructed the right to take his positions according to the local moral order in operation. A key implication that can be drawn from the results is that public relations and communication strategies must be proactive and agile in responding to external challenges. As discussed, public relations positions are fluid and subject to external forces that can destabilize a taken or assigned position. This research demonstrated that agility in responding to these external forces could create a dividend for an individual or organisation engaged in public relations positioning.

This study adds to the growing body of literature examining public relations positioning in the context of political communication. It is hoped that this study has contributed to field in furthering the discussion of how discursive speech acts can legitimise and disrupt the positions of individuals and organisations, and how the right to take or assign positions is socially constructed.

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