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Contesting the ‘national interest’ and maintaining ‘our lifestyle’: A discursive analysis of political rhetoric around climate change.

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Abstract

The release of the fourth *UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* report in February 2007 prompted a flood of responses from political leaders around the globe. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in Australia, where its release coincided with the first sitting week of the Australian Parliament, in an election year. The current study involves a discursive analysis of climate change rhetoric produced by politicians from the major Australian political parties in the period following the release of the ICPP leading up to the national election. Data include both transcripts of parliamentary debate and statements directly broadcast in the media. The analysis focuses on the various ways in which the issue of climate change was invoked and rhetorically managed by each of the two parties in the lead up to the election. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which appeals to the ‘national interest’ and ‘lifestyle maintenance’, both regular features of political rhetoric, were mobilized by both parties to discursively manage their positions on the climate change issue. Implications of the ways in which such appeals were constructed are discussed in relation to the discursive limits of the ways in which the issue of climate change is constructed in public debate.

Contesting the ‘national interest’ and maintaining ‘our lifestyle’: A discursive analysis of political rhetoric around climate change.

On the 2nd of February 2007 the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) handed down their Fourth Assessment Report (IPCC, 2007) in Paris. The report painted a fairly dire picture of the global climate predicament and made very firm statements regarding the need to reduce global emissions of carbon dioxide. Not surprisingly, it prompted a flood of responses from political leaders around the globe. Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in Australia, which (under the incumbent conservative Liberal-National Party coalition government) had remained one of only two developed nations (along with the USA) not to have ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Australia also holds the less than illustrious title of having one of the largest *per capita* carbon emissions of any nation world-wide (Baumert, Herzog & Pershing, 2005). The release of the IPCC report also coincided with the first sitting week for the year of the Australian Federal Parliament. This timing gained further significance by virtue of the fact that the incumbent government was required, by constitutional regulations, to call a Federal Election at some point prior to the completion of the 2007 calendar year.

A representative national poll¹ conducted for The Australian Newspaper shortly after the release of the IPCC report indicated that 76% of respondents believed that ‘climate change is a major problem’. The apparent sudden surge in public interest and concern around the issue was seized upon by the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP), who, under the relatively new leadership of Kevin Rudd, quickly adopted ‘action on climate change’ as one of its key policy platforms in the quest to win office. The 24th of November election would eventually be easily

¹ Newspoll, 21 Feb. 2007, available online at <http://www.newspoll.com.au>

won by the Labor party who, after spending 12 years in opposition, recorded major swings in their favour across most parts of the nation (Williams, 2008). Exit polling conducted for The Climate Institute by the Australian Research Group in marginal seats around the nation showed that, of voters who gave their first preference to Labor, 70 percent indicated climate change to be an area on which they believed that the two parties could be ‘distinguished’ from one another (second only to industrial relations at 83 percent). Furthermore, when all polled voters were asked whether they thought either of the two major parties was better at handling climate change, 41 per cent chose the ALP and only 16 per cent the former government (Milne, 2007). Such opinion poll and exit poll data may at first glance suggest a relatively straight forward reading of the social psychological status of ‘climate change action’ in the public consciousness in Australia during the period in question. However, as much social psychological work from the discursive vein has pointed out (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1995), a potential theoretical limitation of such data is that there is an assumption made that the attitude object in question (e.g., ‘climate change action’) represents a consensually agreed upon object of thought. What is often ignored in the interpretation of such data is the extent to which the meaning of the very attitude objects in question can be constructed in a multiplicity of ways in everyday talk, often even within a single speaker’s account. Condor, Gibson & Abell’s (2006) recent work in the area of English/British identity provides a perfect case in point. These authors highlight the extent to which national surveys asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they identify as “British” and/or “English” have typically been interpreted in ways that belie the far more complex and nuanced fashion in which such terms are deployed in everyday talk amongst various sections of the community. In relation to the present context, therefore, whilst exit polls may have suggested that respondents voted for Labor due to a cognitive representation of Labor being more willing to

take action on climate change, it is important to interrogate, discursively, the ways in which Labor (and their opponents) actually constructed the attitude object/s in question in their political rhetoric.

The socially constitutive nature of talk and text relating to environmental/ecological issues has been highlighted by a range of authors across a range of disciplines, including sociology, linguistics and discursive/rhetorical social psychology (see Macnaghten & Urry (1998), Harré, Brockmeier & Mühlhäusler (1999) and Aiello & Bonaiuto (2003), respectively, for reviews). More specifically, there is a large body of literature that has investigated the ways in which the issue of *climate change* (previously known as ‘global warming’ or ‘the greenhouse effect’) is represented within public discourse (e.g., Bell, 1994; Henderson-Sellers, 1998; Mormont & Dasnoy, 1995; Wilkins, 1993; Wilson, 1995; Zehr, 2000). The majority of these studies, particularly in more recent years, have tended to focus on analyses of media representations. Areas of investigation have included analyses of the ways in which constructions of uncertainty, scientific controversy and climate scepticism have proliferated through the media as a function of journalistic professional standards premised on the requirement for ‘balanced reporting’ (Antilla, 2005). Carvalho’s (2005; 2007) recent analysis of climate change in the UK ‘quality press’ also reveals the ways in which the media’s specific constructions of the ‘facts’ regarding climate change can be seen as both potentially ideologically laden and as ‘play[ing] an important role in the sustenance or contestation of political choices’ (2005, p.19). Other work has focused on the intertextual nature of media, scientific and political discourse around climate change. For example, Weingart, Engels and Pansegrau (2000) conducted a discursive analysis of changing constructions of climate change in scientific, political and media discourse in Germany between 1975 and 1995, identifying

discrepancies between the three domains. It was found that ‘scientists politicized the issue, politicians reduced the scientific complexities and uncertainties to CO2 emissions reduction targets, and the media ignored the uncertainties and transformed them into a sequence of events leading to a catastrophe and requiring immediate action’ (p. 280). In a similar vein, Grundmann (2007) performed an analysis of the US and German press between 1988 and 2004, comparing the extent to which climate change advocates, sceptics and the IPCC were cited in the articles, finding that the press in each country relied on quite different sources of scientific expertise when reporting on climate change.

The political developments around climate change in Australia during the course of 2007 raise some specific interesting questions from a social psychological perspective. First, an analysis of the rhetorical maneuvers by both sides of Australian politics in the wake of the release of the IPCC in February 2007 and the much anticipated Stern report (ahead of the November election) is of significance in that it allows for an investigation of the ways in which a global environmental issue such as climate change plays out as a key issue in *nation*-level political electioneering, in terms of discourse and rhetoric. The politically problematic nature of global environmental issues in a national context can arguably be seen as stemming from (amongst others) two main sources: Firstly, the extent to which global-level initiatives may conflict with attempts to be seen as acting in the ‘national interest’ and, secondly, the extent to which addressing issues of resource consumption associated with environmental risk can be set up as in opposition to the modern liberal principles of economic progress and free-reign consumerism (Bulkeley, 2001). Both issues seem highly significant, given that ‘acting in the national interest’ and ‘allowing free citizens to consume’ arguably represent two ubiquitous rhetorical arguments in political debates in modern western societies.

Secondly, there is no doubt that climate change is becoming an increasingly important international issue, one that is attracting considerable attention from both governments worldwide and the general public. As social psychologists we are also interested in the ways in which social identities around climate change are becoming increasingly salient concerns and, more particularly, morally accountable matters. The contested and highly politicised debates around climate change have generated a range of social, political, and moral identities around this issue, which are being routinely mobilized and invoked in particular ways to warrant, challenge and or undermine the varied positions taken on this issue. As such, one of our aims in this paper is to demonstrate how these emergent social identities around climate change are rhetorically organised and strategically managed in political rhetoric and argument.

The 'national interest'

As Billig (1995) argues, the notion of 'nationhood' has acquired a commonsense taken-for-granted status that informs not only political discourse but everyday sense-making practices. Appeals to the 'national interest' are therefore ubiquitous in political discourse, not only in matters pertaining to foreign policy, where the discourse of national interest is most prevalent, but increasingly also in domestic policy debates. Despite its slippery nature, it is at the same time a powerful rhetorical resource commonly mobilised in political discourse to prescribe, justify, and invoke public support for particular policy positions (Billig, 1995; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Thus, precisely what constitutes a nation's 'interests' is a highly contestable matter. Indeed, Reicher and Hopkins (2001) have demonstrated the discursive utility of 'national interest' talk in political rhetoric and its ubiquitous use by parties across the entire political spectrum to mobilise public support for contrasting policies and agendas. Dickerson's (1998)

discursive analysis of ‘national interest’ talk in televised political discourse, for example, found that the ‘national interest’ was a rhetorical resource that was drawn upon by politicians to accomplish two main functions: (1) to construct social realities that forward particular ideological agendas, and (2) to attend to local interactional concerns such as exoneration and blaming. The ‘national interest’ then, becomes a useful resource when discussing the intentions behind either one’s own or others’ political actions and, at the same time, for constructing and prescribing political ‘reality’.

A specific and detailed example of this kind of rhetorical positioning can also be found in Wallwork and Dixon’s (2003) analyses of the mobilisation rhetoric of the British Countryside Alliance around the Hunting With Dogs Bill. In this context, it was shown how the Alliance exploited the rhetoric of place (relating to the ‘Idyllic British Countryside’) to frame the preservation of hunting practices as being an issue of *national* importance and interest (as opposed to simply a concern of the upper-class landed gentry). Thus, we see how *particular* constructions of national identity can be used to align particular policy positions with the so-called ‘national interest’.

Although climate change is an issue of international and global concern, it can also be seen as an issue of *national* importance. Indeed, thus far, initiatives and policies addressing the problem of climate change have largely been determined independently by nation states. As such, climate change policies are vulnerable to claims and accusations that they are *not* consonant with the national interest. For example, reducing a nation’s carbon emissions or investing in potentially expensive alternative energy sources are at risk of being represented as damaging or undermining the national economic interest. One study that focuses on the issue of national interest discourse specifically in relation to climate change policy is Hovden and

Lindseth's (2004) (Foucauldian) discourse analysis of Norwegian climate change policy during the 1990s. These authors map the shift from a policy discourse of 'national action' (focused on a moralistic willingness to be an environmental pioneer and set unilateral national emissions targets) to a 'thinking globally' discourse (focused on a cost-effective reduction in emissions at a global level that limited the need for actual domestic reductions in Norway). As this example demonstrates, the relationship between the nation state and wider global politics can be seen as an important component of nation-level political rhetoric around global environmental issues such as climate change.

Another key element of the politics of environmental policy (including climate change), however, is the political and institutional relationship between the nation state and the individual citizen. It is to this issue that our discussion now turns.

Ecological Modernisation and Lifestyle Maintenance

Previous authors have examined the ways in which the environmental problematic has often lead to a discursive construction of such issues as being ameliorable through technical solutions, without recourse to reform of existing social, political or economic institutions (Hajer, 1995). Such discourses of purely economistic (or 'weak') ecological modernization have been seen as a useful strategy in managing ecological dissent in such a way that distances such modernist discourses from the more interventionist remedies of the 1970s. This is arguably achieved by constructing environmental protection as compatible with unbridled economic growth and the associated growth in high-consumption lifestyles (Christoff, 1996). For example, Lovell's (2004) analysis of discourses around sustainable housing in the UK since the 1970s demonstrates the ways in which the 'deep green' ideological discourse of advocates of

sustainable housing in the 1970s and 80s has been, in more recent times, co-opted by a mainstream governmental policy agenda of ‘low carbon housing’ that is highly ecologically modernist in nature. They cite a discourse of ‘smart’ housing as one such example, within which there is a focus upon technologies that allow residents to save resources without having to increase their awareness of green issues or subscribe to green ideologies, nor even make any changes to their ‘lifestyle’. Such discursive constructions of a ‘need’ to maintain current lifestyles are also evident in Kurz, Donaghue, Rapley and Walker’s (2005) analysis of residents’ talk about their own energy consumption. These authors demonstrate the way in which levels of energy consumption, in contrast to water consumption (in an arid climate), are constructed as not up for negotiation. For example, one participant claimed that “the TV, the radio, the hair-drier, appliances in the kitchen that make things easier...are things that people *rely on for everyday life*” (p. 612, emphasis added). Phillips (2000) has suggested that such formulations form part of a wider ‘*discourse of everyday constraints*’ (p. 182) that is often drawn upon to account for individual behavioural practices, or lack thereof, in the environmental domain.

As the aforementioned work of Wallwork and Dixon (2003) on the hunting controversy in the UK demonstrated however, the issues of ‘lifestyle maintenance’ and nationalism are often mobilized *simultaneously* by groups opposing various government policy proposals. That is, by constructing certain elements of ‘lifestyle’ (in that case, practices associated with a ‘rural idyllic’ lifestyle) as being somehow central to an (idealized) *national* ‘way of life’, policies seen as threatening such practices are demarcated as ‘out of bounds’ for policy intervention. A similar analysis, and one relating more closely to the current topic, is Luke’s (2000) discussion of right-wing reactions within the United States to the Rio Earth Summit of 1992. Luke outlines the ways in which environmentalism, as an issue, became increasingly framed (post-summit) as a threat to

‘the American way of life...[as exemplified in the form of] backyard barbecues, fast cars, red meat and air conditioners’ (p.57). As such, one can see that particular constructions of ‘lifestyle maintenance’ are often put together in a politicized context in a way that relies heavily on notions of ‘national interest’. This ‘national interest’ is often heavily imbued with particular constructions of national identity that centre around notions of a Western consumerist ‘lifestyle’ that have as their core a sense of entitlement to high standards as living.

Thus, we can see how responding to the IPCC Report’s call for drastic and immediate action on climate change represented potentially treacherous terrain for a political party wishing to win office in a national election. This was especially so in the Australian context, where such a large proportion of the nation’s GDP is generated by energy-intensive export industries such as Coal, Aluminum, and Iron Ore. In such a political context, it is of social psychological interest to investigate the ways in which the issue of the ‘national interest’ was mobilized and managed by political parties from both sides of the political spectrum in the climate change debate. Moreover, given the drastic cuts to world greenhouse gas emissions proscribed by the IPCC (25-40% by 2020; 80% by 2050), it is also of interest to investigate the ways in which politicians navigated the politically contentious issues implicated in dealing with proposed changes that would perhaps be difficult to easily subsume under discourses of (weak) ecological modernisation. As highlighted above, an examination of the attendance to the national interest *and* lifestyle maintenance within national political rhetoric is also likely to bring into focus the ways in which constructions of national identity are implicated in such maneuvers.

The Present Study

The current paper analyzes political rhetoric around climate change that was produced by the major Australian political parties following the release of the IPCC report (February 2007) in the lead up to the Federal Election in November of that same year. As such, the data for the project are ‘naturally occurring’ (Potter, 2002) qualitative data that were collected from various broadcast and online media during the period in question. The corpus of data consists of public speeches, television and radio media interviews, official political party media releases, as well as Hansard transcripts of debates in both the houses of the Australian Parliament. The analysis is informed primarily by the principles of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1987, 1991; Weltman & Billig, 2001) and focuses on the various ways in which the issue of climate change was invoked and rhetorically managed by each of the two major parties in the lead up to the election. Specifically, the analysis attends to two particular features of the data: a) the rhetorical recourse to the ‘national interest’, and b) notions of lifestyle maintenance/change and the implications these have for identities in western industrialized nation states like Australia.

Method

The Data Corpus

Data were collected from the 1st of February until the end of July 2007. During this period, everything that politicians from both of the two major parties (and the minor Greens party) said, in public, about climate change was collected in audio or text form. The full data corpus consisted of over 300 multi-page ‘public statements’ (i.e., speeches, interviews and media

releases) about climate change, as well as over 500 pages of parliamentary transcript of debate that directly addressed the topic of climate change.

This paper, however, focuses specifically on the period from the 2nd of February to the 30th of April, which represents the period during which the two parties' electoral platforms around climate change developed and evolved, with the subsequent months leading up to the election representing a more consolidated 'party line' from each side. The current analysis is based specifically upon 139 'public statements' (98 from the ALP and 41 from the Coalition), as well as 172 pages of parliamentary transcript of debates in Parliament that directly addressed the topic of climate change. Extracts from the data corpus will be presented to support the analysis; where audio recordings were available, these have been transcribed using Jefferson's (1984) transcription system. Whilst our particular analytic focus adopted in the present paper does not focus greatly on these more fine-grained para-linguistic particulars, we have included this notation for the benefit of readers who may wish to interrogate the extracts at this particular level.

Method of Analysis

The approach to analysis draws upon the principles of both discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1987, 1991; Weltman & Billig, 2001). Both of these approaches have as their focus the ways in which discourse and rhetoric actively construct particular versions of social reality, which in turn, accomplish particular social and interactional objectives such as explaining, justifying, blaming, accusing, and so on (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hepburn, 2000; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Specifically, the current study is

concerned with identifying the particular discursive practices and rhetorical strategies used by both major parties in formal and informal political talk about the ‘problem’ of (and ‘solutions’ to) climate change. Our analysis focuses on examining the constructions made available by these ways of talking, and the implications of such constructions. For example, we are interested in how the deployment of various constructions worked to achieve particular ends, both in the situated interactional context of parliamentary debate and political interviews, but also at a broader level of shared cultural resources that are drawn upon to make sense of climate change as an increasingly salient global issue. Although these approaches to analyzing discourse – the local interactional and the broader cultural – have sometimes been treated as oppositional (Billig, 1999; Schegloff, 1997; 1998; 1999), we aim to adopt a synthetic approach to analysis as advocated by both Wetherell (1998) and Phillips (2000). By attending to both the practical and local concerns of social interaction as well as broader cultural repertoires of understanding that are being drawn upon to talk, argue and debate the dilemmatic topic of climate change, we hope to advance our understanding of how this issue is being oriented to in public discourse and political rhetoric.

Analysis and Discussion

This analysis centres around an examination of the different ways in which the rhetorical resources (Billig, 1987; Billig et al., 1988) of ‘national interest’ and ‘lifestyle maintenance’ were attended to by both sides of the political debate. We argue that the rhetorical positioning of a proposed political party policy as being in line with the ‘national interest’ or as involving the ‘maintenance of lifestyles’ was persuasive given the nature of these resources as bottom-line arguments. Building on previous research (e.g., Dickerson, 1998; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), we

examine ways in which these resources were constructed and functioned flexibly, constituting the problem of, and solutions to, climate change in various ways.

Contrasting the 'national interest' with 'ideology'

As the Australian political debate around climate change unfolded post the release of the IPCC report, it quickly began to focus in on the issue of the 'national interest'. Indeed, during election campaigns the 'national interest' becomes a ubiquitous rhetorical resource - an end or objective that any party policy must be able to be seen to be pursuing. In relation to climate change policy specifically, potential policies needed to be constructed by party spokespeople in such a way as to manage two potential 'dilemmas' arising from the 'crisis'/'challenge' of climate change, namely, the health of the national economy, and Australia's relative political and economic positioning in a global context.

From the conservative coalition Government side, references to national economic interest were used to undermine Labor's claims that the government should be taking 'drastic and immediate action' to reduce emissions, with such actions constructed by the government's rhetoric as being damaging to Australia's economy. We see evidence of this construction in the Environment Minister, Malcolm Turnbull's, address to Parliament in Extract 1 below:

Extract 1

1 Turnbull: Wh↑at will the (0.3) the ah: (0.2) the member for Kingsford Smith
2 do: (0.4) if massive reductions in ah: (0.2) in emissions are
3 imposed on Australia=way beyond those (0.4) of our competitors
4 (0.4) .h what will he do: when there are thou:sands of Australians
5 out of work (0.4) .h when instead of a:dding two million jobs (0.5)
6 as the Howard government has done=two million jobs are swept
7 away (0.4) when the cost of industry (0.4) the cost of
8 >industry=energy intensive industries goes through the roof=what
9 will he s↑ay:< when nothing h↑appens
10 (0.5)
11 Unknown: °He'll retire°=

12 Turnbull: =When nothing changes to the climate=when it's still getting
13 warm↑er (0.5) .h and it's still getting ↑drier (0.4) .h what will he say
14 I conso:le you (0.3) you poor unemployed people=I console you
15 from my pillar of virtue (0.4) I conso:le you (0.4) because you: have
16 done the right thing .h we have sacrificed you (0.5) in the interests
17 of our ideology. (0.4) you have been sacrificed your jobs your
18 livelihoods (0.4) .h and by the wa:y (0.4) nothing has been
19 a[chieved].
20 Speaker: [Member] for Kingsford Smith
21 (0.3)
22 Turnbull: That that that's the Labor Party philosophy.

(House of Representatives, 7th of February, 2007)

In this extract from the parliamentary transcript, we see how Turnbull constructs the Labor Shadow Minister for Environment (and member for Kingsford Smith), Peter Garrett's calls for drastic and immediate actions as being to the detriment of Australia's economic interests. Specifically, he provides a three-part list of negative economic consequences in the pursuit of such policies (ll. 4-8) - 'thou:sands of Australians out of work'; 'two million jobs . . . swept away'; 'the cost of . . . energy intensive industries goes through the roof' – functioning in the local interaction of parliamentary debate to present Labour Party policy as flawed. Turnbull also repeatedly asks rhetorical questions ('what will the member for Kingsford Smith do', 'what will he say'), which are then followed immediately by a worked-up hypothetical speech from Garrett to the 'poor unemployed people'. The repeated emphasis on 'you' and 'your' in this turn arguably functions to contrast Garrett and the ALP with the 'people', thus constructing the ALP as in opposition to the 'people' and, by implication, the 'national interest'.

Thus, calls by the ALP for a heeding of the IPCC's warning and the setting of ambitious emissions reduction targets were constructed as showing a flagrant and irresponsible disregard for the 'national (economic) interest'. We see here, therefore, an example of the way that the

‘national interest’ can be used as a rhetorical resource in political interaction to question the legitimacy of an opponent’s motives (as per Dickerson, 1998). What is also interesting, however, is the way in which Turnbull works to construct the Labor position as being driven by the pursuit of ‘*ideology*’ (l. 17). The use of the category ‘ideology’ in this context is significant for the connotations it evokes to represent the Labor opposition as adopting an extreme or dogmatic position on climate change, as opposed to a position which is arrived at by an objective appraisal of the facts. Turnbull appeals to the commonplace understanding in liberal democratic societies that the ‘national (economic) interest’ should not be hi-jacked by policy that is driven by ideology (ll. 16-19) or by party-political philosophy (l. 22). In this account, the national interest is juxtaposed with ideological interest: whereas the government is represented as protecting the former, the opposition is accused of damaging the collective interest in pursuit of a self-interested party-political agenda. Thus, taking immediate and drastic steps to reduce emissions (as recommended by a panel of the world’s top scientists in the IPCC) was constructed as an inherently ‘ideological’ policy that would see unsuspecting Australians “sacrificed” in the pursuit of mere ‘ideology’.

In addition to questioning the ALP’s motives for taking action on climate change, the Coalition was also forced to respond to the ALP’s construction of Prime Minister John Howard and his cabinet as ‘climate change sceptics’, by virtue of their track record of playing down the significance of the issue (prior to the 2007 IPCC report) and their continued refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Indeed, this identity ascription as ‘climate change sceptics’ became a problematic identity for the government at the time and one that needed to be accounted for, given the reported increasing scientific consensus about the ‘reality’ of climate change. Thus, there was a need for Howard and his colleagues to attend to their own accountability around the

issue, and the implications of this in terms of what the electorate should expect from them if re-elected. As we see in Extract 2 below, Rudd calls into question the government's problematic identity as 'climate change sceptics', which is countered by Howard by again invoking the 'national interest' as a rhetorical resource (Dickerson, 1998).

Extract 2

1 Speaker: >The Honourable the Leader of the Opposition<
2 Rudd: Thanks Mister Speaker=my question again to the Prime Minister.
3 (0.7) Prime Minister (0.2) is it the case that (0.3) after eleven years
4 in government. (0.6) .h the government has: (0.3) refused to ratify
5 the Kyoto con- (0.3) protocol (0.4) failed to increase the mandatory
6 renewable energy target (0.5) failed to introduce a national
7 emissions trading scheme (0.7) Prime Minister: (0.5) how can a
8 government that is full of climate change sceptics=
9 Unknown: =ohh:=
10 Rudd: =be part of the climate change solution.
11 Various: Hear hear
12 Speaker: >The Honourable the Prime Minister<
13 Unknown: °Hear hear°
14 (0.5)
15 Howard: Well Mister Speaker it is true that um (0.2) we ah haven't ratified
16 Kyoto because ah (0.4) .h to ratify Kyoto would not be=in
17 Australia's ↑interest
18 Various: Hear hear=
19 Howard: =Ah the tr- the truth ah Mister Speaker is that this government (0.7)
20 ah this government is: ah (0.8) ah composed of a lot of people who
21 are sceptical about certain things. (0.7) .h they're sceptical about
22 knee jerk environmental solutions (0.3) that would damage the jobs
23 of [coalmi=]
24 Speaker: [Order]
25 Howard: =ners in Australia Mister Speaker.
26 Unknown: °Hear hear°
27 Howard: They're sceptical about responses to climate change (0.6) that
28 would put Australia at=a competitive disadvantage with the rest of
29 the world (0.7) they're also sceptical Mister Speaker about ruling
30 out solutions that are clearly (0.5) in the long term interest of this
31 country. (0.5) let me say (0.6) to the climate change purists (0.4) or
32 the ch- climate change fanatics on the other side (0.4) let me say to
33 the:m (0.5) the <cleanest and greenest energy source of all (0.3) is
34 the one you won't look at> (0.3) and that's nuclear power. (1.2) it is
35 the cleanest and the greenest Mister [Speaker] (0.4)
36 [..]

37 so Mister Speaker (0.3) I am ↑I am a sceptic yes. (0.6) I'm sceptical
38 Mister Speaker (0.3) at the capacity of the Australian Labor Party
39 (0.5) to provide an answer to this great challenge (0.3) .h that
40 doesn't damage the long term interests of the Australian economy.
41 Various: Hear hear

(House of Representatives, 6th of February, 2007)

In order to manage the local interactional issue of Rudd's charges that the government is 'full of climate change sceptics' (l. 8), we see here how Howard immediately frames his response as relevant to the 'national interest' (ll.16-17). Specifically, Howard discursively re-defines the label 'sceptic' in such a way as to bestow upon this identity, and thus himself and his party, qualities and capacities that equip them to best serve these interests. Howard claims that it is such scepticism that allows the government to avoid 'knee-jerk environmental solutions' to climate change (l. 22) that would 'damage the jobs of coalminers (ll. 22-25), 'put Australia at a competitive disadvantage' (l. 28) and 'rule out' alternative energy solutions such as Nuclear Power (to which the ALP were opposed). Of interest is how Howard repeatedly describes nuclear power as the 'cleanest and greenest' (ll. 33-35), and both times with emphasis. Thus, rather than denying this identity ascription of the government as climate change sceptics, Howard recasts this 'scepticism' as a virtue, not a vice. Indeed by the end of his turn, he affirms and embraces this identity for himself (l. 37: 'Mister Speaker (0.3) I am ↑I am a sceptic yes') and carries this off by aligning his position with the long term 'national interest' (l. 40).

We also see in Extract 2 another example of the ways in which the government set up a contrast between themselves and that of the ALP. In contrast to the level-headed (i.e. 'sceptical') approach of the government, Labor are constructed as 'climate change purists' (l. 31), with this charge then being subsequently upgraded to one of 'climate change fanatics' (l. 32). What we see here then is the pitting of two contrasting and potentially problematic social identities around the

issue of climate change, climate change sceptics on the one hand, and climate change purists or fanatics on the other. Indeed, in the same way that Turnbull accused the Labor opposition of adopting an ideological position on climate change in Extract 1, climate change sceptics (Rudd's accusation of the government) and purists (Howard's counter-accusation of the Opposition) in this extract are both implicitly represented as ideological identities that are not grounded in reality. As we will demonstrate further below, both identity ascriptions were vulnerable to charges of 'extremism' and of being in opposition to the 'national interest' and were deployed strategically by both parties to recruit support for their respective policy positions.

With a commitment to avoiding 'damage' to the 'national interest' having been adopted as the catch cry of the Coalition rhetoric around climate change, the government faced a difficult task in developing a (distinguishing) policy that could be simultaneously constructed as both providing an adequate response to the IPCC report and not sacrificing what they described as Australia's 'natural advantage' as a fossil-fuel-rich nation. In a move somewhat reminiscent of the Howard Government's 'pacific solution' policy on asylum seekers in 2001², a similarly 'offshore' policy solution was released to tackling carbon emissions: The Global Deforestation Initiative. This initiative, in essence, involved investing Australian money in attempts to restructure economic activities in developing countries (especially nearby Indonesia) so as to reduce the amount of old-growth rainforest being cleared in these regions. As Howard argued in a national radio interview:

² This policy involved the Australian Government brokering a deal to send those arriving on Australian shores seeking asylum to detention centres on the small Pacific Island nation of Nauru.

Extract 3

1 Howard: ... we should embrace practical immediate measures (0.6) uh such as our
2 initiative on deforestation which will (0.5) uh reduce greenhouse gas
3 emissions but won't do such dramatic damage to the Australian economy.

(Interview on AM program (ABC Radio National), 29th March 2007)

In this extract, Howard positions himself and the government as able to provide strategies to manage both climate change and the economy, constructing the two issues as not incompatible. Thus, the Liberal party were able to retain their commitment to not doing 'drastic damage to the Australian economy' (l. 3), whilst still being seen to be supporting action ('practical immediate measures', l. 1) on climate change through the preservation of offshore carbon sinks. This policy proposal then neatly side-stepped the requirement of Australia to reduce its own carbon emissions (which was implicitly equated with damaging the economy) by shifting the burden of responsibility on to other (developing) nations. Thus the limits to climate change action (which was represented primarily by the government as a global international concern) were prescribed first and foremost by Australia's economic interests. This tension between in-principle support of climate change action and the in-practice limits placed on that action, represents a 'theory/practice' distinction, whereby Howard and the government asserted their commitment to an ideal of climate change action while, at the same time, undermining this ideal through 'practical' measures (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987); measures which effectively privilege the national economy over climate change.

From the ALP's perspective, the rhetorical resource of 'national interest' provided a more complex dilemma to be managed. In a nation whose (heavily unionized) coal industry of over 30,000 employees earns approximately A\$24 billion in export revenue, a ALP policy platform of drastically reducing carbon emissions required some degree of rhetorical work in order to

address concerns around the ‘national interest’. Firstly, in relation to the national economy, Labor constructed the Government’s past (and presumed future) *lack* of action on climate change as ‘damaging to the national economic interest’. Thus, while the ‘national (economic) interest’ is still privileged here, it is reframed to have alternative implications for climate change action. Labor’s Shadow Treasurer, Wayne Swan, weighed into the debate in order to address these potential concerns.

Extract 4

1 Swan: Climate change goes to the core of our economic prosperity. The Stern
2 Report made it very clear. You can’t continue to have economic prosperity
3 if you don’t address climate change. If you don’t address climate change in
4 a narrow period of 10 or so years, the economic consequences of that put
5 prosperity at risk.

(Doorstop Media Interview, 6th February 2007)

We see in Extract 4 above the way in which Swan counters the Government’s construction of immediate and drastic actions to reduce emissions as spelling doom for the Australian economy by invoking the Stern Report³ as an empirical warrant to, instead, construct *inaction* on climate change as being the economically irresponsible policy position for the nation, and as being against the ‘national (economic) interest’ (‘the core of our economic prosperity’, l. 1). Indeed, the citing of the Stern Report by Swan grounds his claims about economic prosperity in the expert status of a highly-regarded and distinguished economist, someone who has the category entitlement to make such claims (Dickerson, 1997; Potter, 1996). Thus inaction on climate change was constructed here as an *economic* issue and not an environmental issue alone.

³ A report commissioned by Tony Blair to assess the potential economic impact of climate change under a ‘business as usual scenario’, in which senior economist Sir Nicholas Stern, now famously, stated that the economic effects of climate change could be equivalent to ‘two world wars and a great depression’.

We can see this construction again in this extract from the Peter Garrett-Malcolm Turnbull televised debate on climate change, moderated by the ABC TV's Kerry O'Brien.

Extract 5

1 Garrett: But it's also (.) a very big carbon market that's developing out there Kerry=
2 and you've got the existence of clean development mechanisms in countries
3 where (.) Australian businesses who could export f-for example their solar
4 energy or their (.) wind power to other countries in the world, who are ↑part
5 of Kyoto don't get to take the benefit and can't get in on the action, so
6 Australian businesses have actually been sacrificed on the altar (.) of the
7 Howard Government's (.) very very strong (.) re↑jections of Kyoto

(Turnbull-Garrett debate on ABC TV's 7.30 Report, 8th February 2007)

Thus, under this construction, the refusal by the Howard Government to ratify the Kyoto protocol is repositioned by Garrett as a *failure* to protect the 'national interest'. Indeed Garrett invokes both a religious metaphor and an extreme case formulation to represent Australian businesses as having been '*sacrificed on the alter* of the Howard Government's very, very strong rejections of Kyoto' (ll. 6-7, emphasis added). This talk of 'sacrifice' parallels that of the government's argument in Extract 1, where Turnbull describes Australian workers' jobs and livelihoods as being *sacrificed* by the ALP's 'ideologically-driven' climate change policy.

Challenging the 'common sense' of 'national interest'

At this stage of the debate, during the weeks immediately following the release of the IPCC report, one could say that the electorate had been provided with a relatively clear choice between the two parties with regards to climate change policy. The ALP had adopted a relatively 'green', 'immediate action on climate change' policy platform with a strong focus on renewable energy, with the incumbent Government offering a relatively 'conservative', 'don't rush into drastic changes' policy platform. As we have demonstrated, both parties had drawn on the

rhetorical resource of the ‘national interest’ to defend themselves from accusations of stake and interest: that effectively their positions were ideologically or politically driven. Furthermore, both had typically constructed the ‘national interest’ as being based in the national economy. However, in the middle of February, the debate was to take a sudden turn. On the 12th of February, Senator Bob Brown, leader of the Australian Greens Party, wrote a piece for *The Australian* newspaper (the national broadsheet) in which he called for Australia to ‘Kick the Coal Habit’ and completely phase out the Australian Coal Industry within one term of government (3 years). This article followed the initial ‘breaking’ of this position in a radio interview with ABC Radio National’s Fran Kelly, in which Brown called for whichever party won the upcoming election to use the next three years in government to develop and implement a plan to phase out coal.

Extract 6

- 1 Kelly: Last night Tim Flannery (.) recently ah (.) dubbed Australian of the Year of
 2 course (.) says the social license of coal to operate is being rapidly
 3 withdrawn globally now if you follow that sentence to its logical extension
 4 it would mean ultimately an end (.) to exporting coal (.) around the world (.)
 5 ↑is that th- a position you share? a ban on coal exports?
 6 Brown: We have to move in that direction (.) ah to suddenly ban coal exports would
 7 be (.) massively dislocating b- but ah we’ve got to do it and and we have to
 8 do it within a period of of u:m (.) ah a government you know? We have to
 9 look at-
 10 Kelly: -within one- a period of one government?
 11 Brown: That should be the sort of aim we’re looking at because wh- let me- and Tim
 12 Flannery’s right here and <this is where politicians will panic> (0.5) but we
 13 are exporting to the rest of the world (0.3) what is effectively a deadly threat
 14 (.) to the whole planet and to our children (.) the Prime Minister might say a
 15 4 or 6 degrees (.) temperature rise which is th- the upper end of
 16 expectations this century is going to reduce the comfort level of people (.)
 17 but in fact (.) it’s going to see (.) a: h massive (.) death toll particularly with
 18 elderly people in Australia it’s going to see a massive extinction of
 19 Australia’s wildlife it will see the Murray Darling ah flow shrink in a way
 20 that ah is almost unthinkable water shortages for our big cities um massive
 21 ah dislocations of the lives and jobs of Australians and p-

22 [an- of tens of millions of people around and]
 23 Kelly: [Yes but Senator Brown if you are talking about banning Australia's coal
 24 exports]
 25 Brown: on the move.
 26 Kelly: Yes but Senator if you are talking about banning Australia's coal exports
 27 within one term of Government you're talking about a lot of (.) loss of jobs
 28 and (0.4) qualit- a standard of living in this country I mean coal is
 29 Australia's largest export twenty five and a half billion dollars worth of
 30 exports (.) Now (.) yes you might talk about wanting to ah draw that down
 31 an- and switch (.) you know th- th- erm (0.2) scale back the ah the globe's
 32 depen[dence]
 33 Brown: [Fran]
 34 Kelly: on coal but to talk about wiping out our coal export industry in three years I
 35 mean that's just (.) it's [politi]cally unacceptable isn't it?
 36 Brown: [Well]
 37 (0.2)
 38 Brown: well let me ah (.) politically unacceptable but we see it's politically
 39 unaccept- acceptable to make it thirty years and therefore wipe out the
 40 lifestyle (0.2) the economy (0.3) the jobs (.) of (.) our children

(Interview on AM program (ABC Radio National), 9th February 2007)

Of interest in Extract 6 is the extent to which Brown reframes the economic construction of the 'national interest' that typically formed the cornerstone of the two major parties' rhetorical maneuvering around the climate change issue. Indeed, Brown essentially *concedes* that his proposal would cause some short-term effects that may be perceived as not being in the 'national (economic) interest' ('To suddenly ban coal exports would be massively dislocating', ll.6-7), and also works to preempt the reaction of the two major parties to such a proposal ("this is where *politicians* will panic", l. 12, emphasis added). Here, Brown labels the likes of Howard and Rudd *as* 'politicians', an identity label that in this context appears to function to construct his opponents as being somewhat beholden to their 'political' desire to be seen by the public as acting in the (immediate) national interest. Brown clearly positions himself outside of this desire, however, as he presents himself as *not* panicked by the idea of making such a politically tough decision. Having conceded the political unpopularity of such a position, Brown essentially

dismisses the significance of (dislocating) the short-term national interest (the likelihood of which is also orientated to by the interviewer – ‘a lot of loss of jobs and standard of living in this country’, ll. 27-28) by mobilizing a three-part list of negative environmental consequences (‘massive extinction of Australia’s wildlife’; ‘Murray Darling flow shrink[ing]’; ‘water shortages’) and a three-part list of intergenerational social justice concerns (‘unacceptable to...wipe out the lifestyle, the economy, the jobs of our children’, ll. 39-40). Thus, we see in Brown’s formulation a challenge to the construction of ‘national interest’ as necessarily being based around coal exports and, therefore, implicitly the economy. Instead, the ‘national interest’ is reframed by Brown as incorporating environmental and social responsibility. Interestingly, in the extract above, Brown does not explicitly use the term ‘economy’ in reframing the ‘national interest’, nor is he prompted to by Kelly. Arguably, this omission allows him to construct his position as against the coal industry, but not against the positive development of the national economy. Indeed, at lines 38-40, Brown constructs climate change action involving a ban on coal exports as being in ‘our’ *long-term* national interest with reference to ‘the economy’ and ‘jobs’, as well as to ‘lifestyle’.

The ways in which this announcement by Brown was subsequently attended to by the two major parties in the climate change debate, however, provides a compelling demonstration of the *problematic* status of a position that moves away from the ‘national economic interest’ as a political bottom-line argument. Indeed both major parties seized upon Brown’s statements to further their particular political advantage. The Coalition Government worked to present Brown’s proposition as ‘dangerous’ (ll. 6-9 below), and as vindication of Howard’s warnings against ‘knee-jerk reactions’ that would damage the national interest (especially ‘coal miners and their families’, traditional constituents of the ALP and Trade Union Movement). Moreover, the

Liberals also constructed the ALP as being prone to side with the Greens, by virtue of the Greens traditionally preferencing Labor over the Coalition on their how-to-vote-cards⁴. As we can see below in Extract 7, following Brown's call, Howard worked to construct subsequent support by Rudd of plans to drastically reduce carbon emissions as potentially attributable to *personal* electoral ambition, in the name of which the 'livelihoods of coal miners, their families [and] their communities' would be 'sacrificed' (ll. 22-23).

Extract 7

1 Howard: As a community as we r- (0.6) debate ways of responding
2 effectively (0.7) to climate cha:nge. (0.8) we must do it in a >ca:lm
3 balanced and practical fashion.< (0.7) we mustn't be panicked into
4 adopting mea↑sures (0.6) that are going to damage Australia's
5 economy (0.8) and destroy (0.4) Australian jobs. (0.8) and al↑ready
6 a number of dangerous proposals have emer:ged. (0.6) and the chief
7 amongst those of course is the proposal (0.4) of the Leader of the
8 Australian Greens Senator Brow:n (0.9) that we should (0.3) phase
9 out coal exports from this country. (0.8) now Mister Speaker (0.6)
10 this is a prime example (0.9) of what happens when you get knee
11 jerk as opposed (0.5) to measured calm balanced and responsible
12 (0.4) responses to (0.4)
13 Speaker: Order=
14 Howard: =to climate change issues=Mister Speaker.
15 [...]
16 and we all know (0.4) .h >who's furiously trying to get (0.3) Green
17 preferences (0.4) in the state of Queensland=ah Mister Speak↑er< (0.7) .h
18 none other than the ah the Leader of the Opposition. (0.5)
19 [...]
20 we'll strike a balance between (0.7) .h the interests of dealing with climate
21 change (0.4) and also the preservation of Australian jobs. (0.4) .h we have
22 no intention. (0.6) of sacrificing the livelihoods of coalminers (0.4) .h their
23 families (0.6) or their communities Mister Speaker (0.8) with unfair (0.3)
24 short sighted (0.3) knee jerk responses (0.3) to the challenge of climate
25 change.

⁴ Australia uses a preferential ballot voting system in elections, such that all voters must number every box on the ballot paper to indicate their preferences for candidates running for their local 'seat' in parliament. Thus, the 'preferences' of those voting 1 for a *minor* party often become crucial in determining which of the two major parties wins a particular seat. For a full account of these processes, see <http://www.aec.gov.au/Voting/>

(House of Representatives, 12th February 2007)

In this extract there is more evidence of how Howard and the Government positioned themselves as responding to the challenge and threat of climate change in a ‘calm balanced and practical fashion’ (ll. 2-3) which would not risk damaging the economy or destroying Australian jobs (ll. 4-5). Howard repeats this categorization of the government’s response in lines 11-12 and again in closing by depicting his government as ‘striking a balance’ between competing interests and resisting ‘short sighted knee jerk responses’ (ll. 20-24). As Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2009) have recently argued, the categories of ‘moderation’ and ‘extremism’ are recurrently used by social actors to construct specific group identities and to legitimate and mobilize support for collective action. As we have already demonstrated in previous extracts, identity ascriptions such as ‘climate change sceptics’ and ‘climate change fanatics’ were recurrently mobilized by the major parties to position each other respectively as holding extreme and, by implication, irrational positions on climate change. In this extract, Howard specifically uses the language of moderation to present his government as responding rationally and responsibly to this issue in contrast to his opponents who would risk jeopardizing the economic interests of the nation.

However, as the debate unfolded further, Brown’s proposal eventually worked to Labor’s rhetorical advantage, to the extent that it provided Labor with the opportunity to present themselves as the ‘middle ground’ between the Government and the Greens on the climate change issue. Having firmly adopted Sir Nicholas Stern’s target of 60% reduction on 2000 levels by 2050, and also making noises of possible 30% reductions by 2020, Labor pushed their ‘Investment in Clean Coal⁵ Technology’ policy as their ‘middle ground’ solution to the coal industry conundrum. This ‘middle ground’ rhetorical move is exemplified in the following

⁵ Note, for the benefit of American readers in particular, that when Australian politicians refer to ‘clean coal’, they are referring to full Carbon Capture and Storage Systems (CCS), as opposed to simply making claims about the improved ‘grade’ of coal being burnt.

extract from a doorstep media interview with Kevin Rudd during his tour of the coalmining regions of his home state of Queensland in April.

Extract 8

1 Rudd: Well Bob Brown was in this region recently spelling the end of the Australian
2 coal industry, I'll say this about Bob Brown: Bob Brown has rocks in his head
3 when it comes to the future of coal. I'd say that when it comes to coal I'm an
4 optimist, that's why we put half a billion dollars on the table to assist
5 industry, Rio Tinto, BHP as well as Xtrata to pioneer and perfect the
6 application of clean coal technology when it comes to electricity generation.
7 There is no other country in the world like Australia which has such a huge
8 national interest in making sure that we perfect clean coal technology. We've
9 got to be mindful about what the rest of the world do in 10 or 20 years time if
10 we haven't developed clean coal technology because they're going to become
11 sensitive domestically to their own greenhouse gas emission policies - that's
12 why it's critical. I'm a big fan of this initiative, but I'm also a long-term
13 supporter of coal. And Mr Howard's alternative is 25 nuclear reactors around
14 the coast of Australia.

(Doorstop Media Interview, 3rd April 2007)

We see here how Brown's reframing of the 'national interest' allowed Rudd to characterize Brown's ideas as irrational ('having rocks in his head'). In this way, Labor was able to reposition themselves, through their focus on (the yet to be developed) 'clean coal technology' as acting in the best interests of the nation. Indeed, Rudd emphasizes the magnitude of Australia's stake and interest in developing this technology, describing it as "huge" (ll. 7-8), and as unique and distinct in international comparative terms (l. 7: "There is no other country in the world like Australia"). This position was represented as the sensible middle ground between Brown's proposal to shut down the Coal Industry within 3 years and Howard's (politically unpopular) alternative of a Nuclear agenda (ll. 13-14). Thus, Rudd equates the national interest as residing with an 'action on climate change' policy centred around the development of clean

coal technology and, as such, aligns it with the interests of the *coal industry itself*, Australia's largest export industry.

Thus far, we have demonstrated how both of the major political parties constructed and mobilized the resource of 'national interest', rhetorically, in order to provide a warrant for their policies on climate change. We have also demonstrated the ways in which a challenge to this construction of the 'national interest' and the reframing of this resource on global environmental or social justice grounds was unsuccessful in changing the terms of the debate, highlighting the rhetorical power of defining the 'national interest' in predominantly economic terms. Importantly, the analysis also demonstrates the increasing political salience of social identities around the issue of climate change and how particular identities were constructed as problematic and morally accountable matters. The government was accused by Labor (and the Greens) of being 'climate change sceptics', the Labor opposition was positioned by the government as 'climate change fanatics', and the Greens were positioned by both major parties as 'dangerous' and 'deluded'. These contrasting identities around climate change were essentially all represented as being extreme and irrational. Conversely, a 'middle', measured approach representing balance, reason and rationality was invariably invoked by both major parties as a political and moral solution to the challenges/crises presented by climate change science. Moreover, one of the ways in which both major parties attempted to project this measured and balanced identity was to draw on a 'theory/practice' distinction (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987) in order to represent their policies as being committed to climate change action, while also attending to the practical limitations to such actions which should not risk jeopardizing the 'national (economic) interest'.

Ecological Modernisation and 'Lifestyle Maintenance'

In addition to the repeated mobilising and flexible deployment of the the 'national interest', both parties also demonstrated the need to attend to the issue of 'lifestyle maintenance'. Despite a recognition of a need to reduce carbon emissions (and 'drastically', in the case of Labor), both parties constructed their 'climate change solutions' as involving, and indeed being centered around, the maintenance, rather than the changing, of people's lifestyles. This pervasive concern around 'maintaining lifestyles' provides a further example of a 'theory/practice' distinction; in this instance, the practical limitations on climate change action were based in the rhetoric of maintaining a modern Australian lifestyle. As will be demonstrated below, the construction of 'lifestyle maintenance' was inter-related with the rhetorical use of 'national interest', with both resources functioning to (re)produce various constructions of the Australian/national 'identity' that typically focused around a modern liberal consumerist identity.

The rhetorical resource of 'lifestyle maintenance' was also borne out in the policy proposals themselves, with each party having what one might call their own 'get-out-of-lifestyle-change-free' cards; Clean Coal in Labor's case, and Nuclear Power in the case of the Government (and, one might argue, getting Indonesians to change their lifestyles/livelihoods). Both were presented as ways of reducing carbon emissions whilst managing to produce enough energy to meet a relatively 'business as usual' national energy demand profile. It is worth noting, however, that both of these 'solutions' (Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS), and Nuclear Power) were (and continue to be) potentially moot points in the short term. The IPCC report offered a fairly clear warning that it was imperative that global emissions are brought under control by 2020, in order to avoid a situation of 'runaway climate change'. Estimates at the time, however, predicted that neither CCS technology nor nuclear power plants could have replaced

current/projected base load provided by brown coal power generation in Australia before, at best, about 2019. Also worth noting is that there was little to no focus from either major party on reducing the demand side of the equation; that is, in promoting the simplification or alteration of lifestyles to reduce the actual size of the national base load that needed to be provided (by whatever means). Thus, the ecologically modernist discourse of maintaining current rates of growth in demand for energy (which was what politicians were referring to implicitly when they spoke of ‘lifestyles’) also became, for both parties, something to which they attended within the climate change debate.

On the Government side, the Nicholas Stern targets outlined earlier were opposed on the *very basis* of them ‘threatening the Australian lifestyle’. This can be seen in the following extract from a national radio interview with Howard with the ABC’s Chris Uhlmann:

Extract 9

1 Howard: .h well we have to be very care↓ful (0.7) in setting targets that we don't do
2 greater damage (0.6) to our economy and our=uh lifestyle than .h will be
3 done=uh (0.3) by other things, now (0.5) we've heard suggestions that (0.5)
4 we should have (0.7) a target of thirty per cent reductions by the year two
5 thousand and twenty .hh that's what Sir Nicholas Stern was advocating and
6 that's what (0.6) apparently the Labor party supports because they've been
7 (0.7) uh walking (0.4) beside uh Sir Nicholas Stern on all of these things.
8 >Now I agree< with a lot of what he says (0.7) he's a very respected
9 economist, he should be listened to: (0.7) but his views aren't holy writ, and
10 common sense tell us that (1.0) two thousand and twenty is what, thirteen
11 years from no:w (0.7) to achieve a thirty per cent reduction (0.6) in [green]
12 Uhlmann: [.hh]
13 Howard: =house gas emissions by the year twenty twenty and >it's no good< setting
14 these targets (0.6) in some kind of rhetorical flourish, if you set a target (0.6)
15 you ought to try and meet that target
16 Uhlmann: .hh
17 Howard: =and if we were to set that target and meet it that would throw thousands of
18 people out of work in the coal indust↑ry (0.4) and it would do eno:rmous
19 damage to the Australian economy (0.9) in
20 Uhlmann: >All right if [we could c-<]
21 Howard: [substi]tu:tion for that we should embrace practical
22 immediate measures (0.6) uh such as our initiative on deforestation

(ABC Radio AM program, 29 March, 2007)

We see here how avoiding damage to Australia's economy (indexed as 'our lifestyle' on l. 2) is provided by Howard as a warrant for inaction with regards to setting the kinds of emissions targets called for by Nicolas Stern (30% reductions by 2020). Inherent in this construction is an assumption that current lifestyles *must* be maintained, and that changing lifestyles would constitute some form of 'damage' (l. 2). Moreover, setting emissions targets itself is, in Howard's account, constructed as irrational and defying common sense ('some kind of rhetorical flourish', l. 14) in contrast to 'practical immediate measures' (ll. 21-22) such as the aforementioned 'offshore' deforestation initiative. Notable is the delicate rhetorical work performed by Howard in rejecting the targets specified by Stern who is, after all, a highly regarded economic expert, as Howard himself respectfully acknowledges (ll. 8-9). Although Howard argues that Stern 'should be listened to' (l. 9), at the same time he constructs his recommendations as 'views' which 'aren't holy writ' (l. 9) and, indeed, defy common sense. Moreover, Howard further undermines Stern's recommendations by emphasizing the magnitude of damage that they would cause the Australian economy by the extreme-case formulations (ll. 17-19: 'thousands of people out of work'; 'enormous damage to the Australian economy') and contrasts these consequences with his own 'practical' and 'common sense' approach to the issue.

A similar discourse of taken-for-granted growth (or at least maintenance) in energy consumption is seen below in Extract 10 in which Howard builds the case for nuclear power.

Extract 10

1 Howard: And and and the (0.5) well I mean the ah (0.7) the ah the ah (0.2)
2 the Opposition ah reacts negatively to that but the truth is that if you
3 want to run (0.2) power stations (0.4) .h in a modern economy (0.5)
4 .h there are really only two ways you can do it. (0.5) you do it by
5 fossil fuels or you do it by nuclear power (0.6) .h and that is the
6 view not of John Howard that's the view of Jim [Peacock]
7 Speaker: [Order] (0.5)
8 [Order]
9 Howard: [the] chief scientist of Australia (0.6) and I will take my advice
10 on scientific matters from the Australian chief scientist (0.3) .h
11 before I'll take it from the Leader of the Oppo↑sition↓ (0.4) .h and
12 ah: (0.4) ah e- the no I mean the (0.4) °ah°=this is (0.6) this is at the
13 heart of this debate Mister Speaker. (0.6) you can't run power
14 stations on renewables. (0.5) and yet the Leader of the Opposition
15 (0.5) and those who sit behind him believe that you ↑can (0.6) the
16 only way that you can run power stations in Australia (0.3) and
17 therefore provide electrici↑ty↓ (0.7) for: (0.5) a modern econo↑my↓
18 (0.6) is to run them on fossil f↑uels (0.5) and if you belie:ve (0.3)
19 in (0.5) reducing (1.0) the greenhouse (0.8) gas (1.2) content of
20 fossil fuel usage. (0.7) you must clean up the use of coal (0.6) and
21 as you clean up the use of coal you make its use more expensive
22 (0.6) and that is where nuclear power comes into the equation. (0.6)
23 now that is the irreducible common sense minimum (0.4) of this
24 debate (0.6) about the future of greenhouse gas emissions in a
25 country such as Australia. (0.5) .h we can have all the flamboyance
26 and we can have all the rhetoric under the su:n (0.5) .h but if we are
27 to sustain our standing of living sustain our standard of living (0.6)
28 .h if we are to remain a modern economy (0.4) we need to run
29 power stations and you can't run power stations .h on solar or wind
30 power (0.3) you can only run them on fossil fuels (0.3) or on
31 nuclear power=they are the most two (0.4) .h the two most reliable
32 logical ways (0.4) .h of running power stations

(House of Representatives, 28th March 2007)

We see in Extract 10 how Howard constructs a need to maintain 'a modern economy' (and, thus, 'sustain our standard of living', repeated at ll. 27-28) as the 'common sense minimum of [the] debate' (ll. 23-24), that is, a common sense bottom-line argument. Notably, Howard fends off potential accusations of stake and interest on this issue by co-opting the expert views of

‘Australia’s chief scientist’, Dr Jim Peacock, to warrant his arguments that ‘you cannot run power stations on renewables’ (ll. 13-14 & ll. 29-30) and that ‘you can only run them on fossil fuels or on nuclear power’ (ll. 15-18 & ll. 30-31). Indeed he disavows that these are his own views (ll. 5-7: ‘.h and that is the view not of John Howard that’s the view of Jim [Peacock], (see Dickerson, 1997)).

Whilst conceding that to continue to meet the current (and likely growing) energy demands of the nation by burning fossil fuels is problematic, the solution proposed by Howard is to try to develop ways of burning the same amount of coal whilst sequestering the associated carbon dioxide emissions, or, if this becomes too expensive, to switch to nuclear. Thus, under an ecologically modernist discourse of ‘lifestyle maintenance’, in which the reconfiguring of lifestyles to drastically *reduce demand* for energy is beyond the pale, the Labor position of opposing nuclear power and strongly advocating renewables *is* rendered somewhat of a sitting duck to such bottom-line-arguments as ‘you can’t run power stations on solar or wind power’ (ll. 29-30) ‘in a modern economy’ (l. 17 & l. 28).

The ALP did occasionally mention the possibility of reducing energy demand, however this was only ever done in the context of discussions about introducing new technologies, such as their Green Car Initiative⁶; a Solar Rebate Scheme⁷ and the dissemination of Smart Meters, the latter of which was the topic of a doorstep interview from which the following extract is taken.

Extract 11

1 Rudd: There’s another element too which is critical which is what we do and might
2 be described as demand side management - that is personal responsibility. In
3 other words how can we personally bring down our level of electricity
4 consumption, because not only does that save you money, it also helps when
5 it comes to reducing the amount of electricity which needs to be generated

⁶ A proposal to establish an industry *producing* hybrid vehicles in Australia

⁷ A proposal to increase the government rebate available for households that wish to install solar panel systems of their roof. This proposal was, however, effectively lampooned in the 2008 Budget by virtue of imposing a means test on its availability.

6 which in turn pulls out greenhouse gas emissions from the atmosphere.
7 That's why I'm pleased to be here today with Energy Australia and looking
8 at their Smart Meters. These Smart Meters are a terrific device, helping
9 individuals reduce their demand for electricity and that's why we think it's
10 an important area for the country to take more seriously when it comes to
11 electricity consumers right across Australia. I just looked at some of these
12 Smart Meters which have been trialed in homes, and new technologies as
13 well related to Smart Meters which give you real time information about the
14 number of kilowatts you're sucking in, about the price per kilowatt hour at
15 that time of the day, as well as translating that further into the volume of
16 greenhouse gas emissions which results or arises from that particular burst
17 of electricity consumption. I think this is a really smart way to go. Smart
18 Meters are a smart way to go when it comes to personally reducing your
19 electricity bills and personally reducing your level of greenhouse gas
20 emissions.

(Doorstop Media Interview, 12th April 2007)

Although Rudd does here invoke the notion of both 'demand ... management' (l. 2) and 'personal responsibility' (l. 2), as he himself points out in the extract, these Smart Meters are, in fact, simply a device that provides residents with a greater amount of specific information about their current energy use (ll. 13-17). In addition, they also allow power companies to offer different pricing structures for power consumed at different times of the day, which may encourage residents to try to spread their energy consumption more evenly across the day, which would in turn help reduce the 'peaking' in electricity consumption that makes supplying energy to large cities such an inefficient exercise. This discourse of 'smartness' ("Smart Meters", "a smart way to go") has strong echoes to the 'smart housing' discourse identified by Lovell (2004) that we outlined earlier. In a similar vein to Lovell's observations, however, it is important to note the way in which references to voters 'personally reducing their level of greenhouse gas emissions' (ll.19-20) was really only ever broached in political party rhetoric in relation to the installation of new 'devices'. Such devices (in the case of Smart Meters) would only actually bring about reductions in CO2 emissions if residents also changed their energy consumption

behaviours in response to the information offered by these devices. However, this final caveat was (perhaps unsurprisingly) never the focus of the political debate. Indeed, neither party ever talked about their own climate change policies in relation to either a) increasing energy prices, or b) imposing any kind of regulatory controls on individual consumption practices, a practice that is actually commonplace in almost all major Australian cities with regards to residential *water* consumption. The lack of mention of price increases is particularly significant given that both parties continually advocated the establishment of a national emissions trading scheme, a policy that could only work if it lead directly to quite large increases in the price of carbon intensive goods and services. Thus rather than emphasizing the need for significant reductions in energy consumption that could only be effected by compromises to existing modern lifestyles, these ‘smart’ new technologies/devices are represented here as opportunities for consumers to exercise choice in consumption patterns and levels. Thus, we can see how the ALP, in particular, were able to construct ‘drastic and immediate action’ on climate change as being reconcilable with a maintenance of consumer ‘lifestyles’, as opposed to requiring drastic or immediate *changes* in citizens’ day-to-day practices or the institutional arrangements that govern them.

Conclusion

As Hepburn (1997) has posited, “to understand a social problem . . . we have to be aware of the discursive limits employed in the way that the problem is constructed” (p.27). Such a suggestion is particularly apt in the case of global climate change. Without doubt, there is a clear need for the world’s top scientists to continue their efforts to attempt to monitor, model and predict the current and likely future changes to our climate under various emissions scenarios

through bodies such as the IPCC. As our analysis here has demonstrated, however, the ways in which such scientific reports are responded to, at both the political and individual level, is a complex issue that is ripe for social psychological enquiry. Such enquiry should, to our mind, work at multiple levels and should certainly include individual and community-level ‘behaviour change’ investigations (see Spence, Pidgeon & Uzzell, 2009). As we have demonstrated, however, it is also important that social psychologists (and others) examine the discursive limits of the evolving climate change debate. In the contemporary Australian political context, these limits appear to revolve around a need to construct accounts of climate change policy in terms of both the ‘national interest’ and ‘lifestyle maintenance’. Both of the major political parties invoked a fundamentally *economic* notion of the ‘national interest’ in order to provide a warrant for their policies on climate change, with attempts by the Greens Party to reframe this so-called ‘national interest’ in terms of global environmental or social justice concerns being wholly unsuccessful in gaining any political traction. Moreover, both major parties attempted to position themselves as providing a ‘practical’ approach to the issue, drawing on a ‘theory/practice’ distinction (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987) in order to represent their own policies as being committed to climate change action, while also attending to the practical limitations to such actions which should not risk jeopardizing the ‘national (economic) interest’. Furthermore, The ALP were also able to invoke an ecological modernization discourse to construct ‘drastic and immediate action’ on climate change as being reconcilable with a maintenance, rather than a changing, of consumer ‘lifestyles’.

What ties both of these ubiquitous rhetorical resources - national interest and lifestyle maintenance- together, however, is an inherent construction of both national and individual identities in relation to notions of modern, liberal, consumerism. The term ‘national interest’

was, after all, always situated by the major parties in relation to the national *economic* interest, precluding, for example, the fashioning of new forms of national interest or identity predicated around concerns for global environmental or intergenerational justice. Likewise, ‘lifestyle maintenance’ was inherently constructed in binary opposition to a situation in which individual citizens’ rights to consume at will might be constrained. There has, to date, been little empirical social psychological work that has explicitly examined individual and collective identities around the modern, industrial, western, liberal high-consuming subject. Such investigations would appear to hold great potential in the context of the current push towards ‘sustainability’ and the associated focus on the finite nature of the world’s resources. As the current analysis has demonstrated, such concepts still appear to be gaining little traction within the mainstream politics of a capitalist economy which is predicated on generating greater demand for production and consumption. In many ways, one could argue that consumerism is the very thing that is at stake in the politics of climate change, and that it is precisely this that makes the notion of drastic reductions in carbon emissions such a rhetorically fraught issue for both sides of politics in many nations around the globe. Consumerist and economic rationalist discourses might, thus, be thought of as culturally pervasive rhetorical resources that impose limitations on political debate around climate change,. However the advantage of the synthetic approach to analysis (Phillips, 2000; Wetherell, 1998) adopted here is that it also allows one to examine the implications of the specific ways in which such culturally pervasive rhetorical resources are deployed by political leaders in such contexts as parliamentary debate and media interrogation. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, such an approach also allows for an examination of both the ways in which climate change *policy* is formulated to attend to broader,

culturally pervasive understandings and the specific methods by which it is marketed to an electorate and defended against political opponents' critique.

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