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How Elites Mobilize the Vernacular: A Case Study of Australian Prime Ministers' Use of 'Fair Go' Rhetoric

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Abstract

Prime ministers often use vernacularisms in their political rhetoric, but we know little about how they deploy these forms of speech and the consequences for politics and policy. This article extends work on the 'rhetorical PM' by focusing on how leaders deploy idiomatic expressions in their oratory. The article presents a thematic analysis of four successive Australian prime ministers' use of the country's distinctive 'fair go' expression in speeches and media interviews between 1972 and 1996. Australian PMs increasingly invoked the 'fair go' expression throughout this period for multiple rhetorical purposes, including to make national identity claims, engage in partisan competition and justify policy reforms with strong neoliberal elements. While prevailing scholarship sees 'vernacular politics' as a tool of grassroots actors opposing discourses of globalization and elite-driven reform, this research shows the vernacular is a versatile rhetorical tool mobilized by elites for multiple purposes, including to justify radical policy change.

Keywords: vernacular; policy; imagined communities; idioms; rhetoric

The vernacular – a collection of ideas and expressions used in everyday speech in a specific cultural context – has become an important tool of political mobilization in recent decades. The use of vernacularisms in politics is normally associated with grassroots movements and populist politicians, who use the 'authentic' language of 'the people' to differentiate themselves from established political elites, and to oppose neoliberal and/or cosmopolitan programmes of reform (Aronoff and Kubik 2012; Kefford et al. 2021). Yet research suggests an increasing number of politically centrist elites are resorting to vernacular language to help them convey empathy with everyday problems and sympathy for national traditions and values

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(Manning and Holmes 2014). To be sure, the use of the vernacular by elites is not new in politics; leaders as far back as the time of Aristotle have built trust through arguments drawn from the audience's prior, everyday wisdom (Kane and Patapan 2010). Furthermore, political scientists have shown how revolutionaries historically drew on local political idioms as resources to construct their ideologies and justify regime change (Skocpol 1985). In modern times, democratic leaders who want to convince their populations of the need for radical policy change have been urged to appeal to national cultural traditions and motifs (Phillips and Smith 2000). However, the use of the vernacular by political elites embedded within existing regimes to justify radical policy change presents a set of puzzles for scholars of democratic politics.

At an empirical level, we lack systematic evidence regarding the use of everyday idioms in contemporary political discourse. While scholars of prime ministerial rhetoric have acknowledged that appeals to culture and traditions are essential elements of the modern leader's discursive tool kit (Grube 2013; Myers 2000; Webb and Poguntke 2005: 347–350), these authors do not analyse political uses of everyday speech systematically. Political anthropologists and sociologists have explored 'vernacular politics' in greater depth, yet their conclusions also present problems for understanding how leaders can use everyday idioms. Their work conceptualizes the vernacular as popularly held ideas and traditional practices that are inherently at odds with the modernizing, universal discourses of elites (Aronoff and Kubik 2012). In these works, the vernacular is taken to be a distinct cultural sphere, with its own modes of rhetoric used by non-elites to resist change agendas imposed from above (White 2003). 'Vernacular politics' is thus assumed to be opposed to technocratic, globalist and cosmopolitan discourses and hostile to projects of reform, modernization and multicultural inclusion (Kymlicka 2001). As a result, it is unclear how elite political actors like PMs can use everyday expressions, other than as cynical smokescreens that deceive audiences about their real agendas (cf. Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 683; Goerres et al. 2019; Littler 2017: 92–93; Savona et al. 2021: 515–516). To address these puzzles, in this article we ask: to what extent do prime ministers use vernacular rhetoric, and for what political and policy purposes?

Our empirical analysis focuses on Australia. We compare four consecutive Australian PMs' use of one of the most distinctive 'cultural keywords' drawn from the Australian vernacular: 'fair go'. This phrase was chosen for its enduring use in both popular and elite discourse in Australia, and its association with Australian traditions of egalitarianism, equality of opportunity and procedural justice (Horne 1962; Howard 2023; Sawyer 2003). We examine PMs' rhetorical uses of the 'fair go' expression via an archive of PMs' speeches from the beginning of Gough Whitlam's Labor government in 1972 until the end of the Paul Keating Labor government in 1996. The period witnessed radical policy change in the economic domain, due to global economic shocks and the rising influence of neoliberal ideas, as well as in the social domain, as governments promoted multiculturalism, rights for women and new social policy initiatives. Our findings show that PMs used the 'fair go' expression with increasing frequency throughout this period. We adapt Dennis Grube's (2013) rhetorical governance framework to show how PMs used the 'fair go' expression for three political purposes: developing and debating the meaning of Australia's national identity; justifying policy reform

proposals; and engaging in partisan competition with political opponents. Furthermore, we illustrate that PMs were able to use the ‘fair go’ expression to invite policy innovation, by encouraging public exploration and deliberation over the best ways to solve policy problems and the connection between policy change and national traditions. In so doing, we argue that these leaders partially transformed the meaning of the ‘fair go’ expression, giving it novel cultural, political and policy associations.

These findings contribute original knowledge about how vernacularisms are mobilized in contemporary politics. They illustrate that vernacularisms can be a resource for existing political elites, that they are versatile and not necessarily impediments to change. Instead, they can be used to encourage and justify policy innovation, and in the process, the meanings attached to vernacularisms can change.

Conceptualizing vernacular politics

In this section we review the existing literature on ‘vernacular politics’, a body of work that addresses how local, idiomatic cultures and forms of expression are mobilized for political ends. We suggest that this literature makes three assumptions about the political character and consequences of mobilizing the vernacular: (1) the vernacular emerges from the grassroots as opposed to elite sources; (2) it draws on fixed ideas and constitutes stable identities; and (3) it is resistant to state-centric modes of social change, and to projects of ‘modernization’ in general. We show that work on the vernacular in political science takes a more open stance on its political origins and functions, but it has not elaborated on the mechanisms by which the vernacular can be mobilized. We then draw on theories of rhetorical governance to generate a framework for analysing elite uses of the vernacular.

In political sociology and anthropology, the ‘vernacular’ refers to ideas, texts and concrete practices that are grounded in the everyday lived experience and common language of a particular community (Aronoff and Kubik 2012; Ingraham 2013; Kymlicka 2001; White 2003). Here ‘vernacular knowledge’ and the political identities associated with it are assumed to be attached to a particular culture, resistant to change from the outside, and opposed to rationalist discourses in general (Aronoff and Kubik 2012: 244–245). Common to these works is an assumption that the vernacular can be mobilized as a political tool by and on behalf of non-elites. In Jenny White’s (2003) study, Islamist movements in Türkiye used the ‘vernacular sphere’ of religious and ethnic kinship networks to organize successfully outside of formal institutions dominated by secular Kemalist party elites. Similarly, Marco Briziarelli and Guillem Martínez (2016) show how the grassroots Indignados social movement in Spain mobilized an urban vernacular language of dissent to create electoral success for the Podemos left populist party. Work on the sociology of globalization has emphasized how international discourses of neoliberal globalization are ‘filtered’ through the local vernacular, which dilutes reforms and results in hybrid governance paradigms (Ban 2016). In this way, enduring informal cultures existing outside of the state and its institutions can be sites for practising and mobilizing resistance to state- or elite-centred projects of reform. These observations are consistent with post-structuralist work on neoliberal

governance, which suggests that technical language, rather than vernacular, is the principal mode through which *elites* construct their political and policy arguments (Rose 1999: 52–63).

In political science, authors have adopted a broader view that does not restrict the vernacular to a set of underlying universal cultural traditions available exclusively to non-elites and resistant to change. Theda Skocpol is critical of anthropological approaches to studying ‘cultural idioms’ and their role in politics. For Skocpol (1985: 90), anthropologists tend to assume the existence of ‘integrated patterns of shared meanings, total pictures of how society does and should work’. The problem with this approach, she contends, is that in political revolutions change can only be explained by ‘synchronous’ idiomatic and ideological revolutions, meaning changes in the dominant ideology in a society are paralleled with complete changes in the cultural vernacular; a prospect she finds implausible and contravened by historical evidence. Skocpol (1985: 91–95) agrees that cultural idioms are relatively enduring, but argues that political actors have agency in choosing which idioms to invoke and how to deploy and meld together multiple ‘strands’. Skocpol does not make assumptions about the social position of actors who mobilize idioms. Idioms are therefore the ingredients actors at all levels use to construct specific programmes of reform and revolution, with the implication that these change programmes are constrained and shaped by the range of available idioms.

Skocpol’s work advances the ideas of elite agency and contestation in the context of idioms, as well as the idea that these can be used for radical change. At the same time, Skocpol’s emphasis on the stability and durability of idioms presents problems for understanding how they can be used for modernization. A key issue is the assumption that the vernacular is a historical and cultural inheritance formed outside of political agency. This is reflected in her characterization of political idioms as ‘non-intentionalist’, in contrast with the ‘intentionalist’ ideologies that actors construct and modify to suit their political agendas (Skocpol 1985: 91–92). We suggest that just as there are multiple political idioms available to draw upon in local political contexts, there are likely to be different plausible interpretations of the content and meanings of those idioms. Furthermore, the historical contexts and policy areas in which idioms are applied are likely to shape their use by political actors and interpretation by publics. Finally, we suggest the mechanisms involved in the use of vernacular idioms in politics is underspecified. What are the techniques by which actors mobilize idioms, beyond their role as ideas informing ideologies?

We suggest that these shortcomings can be addressed by exploring the use of vernacular idioms in the rhetoric of political elites. Grube (2013: 135) argues that rhetoric is particularly powerful when it draws on ‘insider’ language that connects to the everyday experiences of citizens. Vernacular idioms encompass ideas about shared identity and commonly held cultural values. We believe they present a rich seam for leaders to mine when designing and framing their political positions and policy agendas. To understand the variety of rhetorical uses of vernacular rhetoric, we adapt and apply Grube’s (2013) work on the communicative work carried out by PMs in their role as the ‘rhetorical PM’. We draw upon Grube’s work to identify three key functions which vernacular language and ideas may contribute to: the creation and delineation of the *imagined community* of the nation, the

cut and thrust of *partisan competition* and in building *policy narratives* which justify programmes of reform.

Scholars using anthropological approaches to vernacular mobilization (Briziarelli and Martínez 2016; Kymlicka 2001; White 2003) share Grube's observation that politicians use language symbolically to evoke a sense of shared identity, worldview and social order between themselves and their audiences. The speaker claims to be speaking legitimately on behalf of and to a particular national 'imagined community' (Anderson 1989). This inspires shared feelings of pride and self-sacrificing love for the in-group while delineating who is not included in that community (Anderson 1989: 132–133). Scholars working in the traditions of critical discourse analysis (CDA) have shown how these kinds of speech acts join with other cultural artefacts like policy documents, television and books to reinforce and naturalize ethnic, economic or other inequalities in a society (Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 1993). These deeply culturally embedded ideas and speech acts also exert a disciplining force of social pressure on people to conform to accepted stereotypes or modes of behaviour.

In the Australian context, ideas of 'fair go' have been studied in relation to discourses of exclusion and inclusion, which often privilege an Anglocentric, masculinist and heteronormative idea of national identity (Bromfield and Page 2020). Carol Johnson (2000) shows how PMs Keating and Howard sought to reconstruct national identity rhetorically in the context of the economic and social changes of the 1990s. Keating's vision was of an expanded national identity that recognized Australia's physical and cultural proximity to Asia, yet it was also dominated by neoliberal economic categories that excluded people who did not see themselves in market terms (Johnson 2000: 29–33). John Howard subsequently exploited insecurity about cultural and social change to enact a 'revenge of the mainstream', which scapegoated marginalized communities and reinforced dominant Anglocentric stereotypes about the Australian imagined community (Johnson 2000: 42–45). These are important insights into the ways language is used to delineate imagined communities in exclusionary ways, which reinforce and justify social and economic inequalities. As Grube (2013) points out PMs *also* address themselves to ethnic, professional or class-based subgroups to build linkages with them. Therefore, when evoking phrases drawn from a vernacular idiom, the PM is making claims about shared values, suggesting certain groups adhere to those values and either explicitly or implicitly excluding those who don't. Furthermore, as post-structuralist scholars have noted, this rhetoric also 'disciplines' the people it includes as members of the imagined community by constructing and promoting particular subjectivities for citizens to adopt. In our study we wish to draw attention to the ways PMs may use vernacular idioms creatively to alter the meaning of shared identities and values and beliefs associated with citizenship.

The second rhetorical element we examine focuses on the vernacular's partisan uses in electoral competition. Claims to competent leadership are a common feature of partisan rhetoric across electoral systems (Rafałowski 2023: 19). It is therefore not surprising that PMs will sell the achievements of their government and party and denigrate their opponents (Grube 2013: 58–59). However, PMs also compare the values and priorities that make their party distinct from its opponents, especially in times of social, political and economic change. Phrases and ideas

drawn from a vernacular idiom have been shown to be a useful tool for political movements mobilizing support or seizing electoral power (Briziarelli and Martínez 2016). Politicians can use ideas like consensus, difference and tradition to delineate the place of their party and their programmes of reform in relation to their political opponents (Johnson 2000: 93). Similarly, we argue that through the process of using vernacular rhetoric, PMs may create a sense of identification with the governing party and its connection to long-standing cultural traditions. However, in the ways they use idioms in the process of partisan differentiation they may use their platform to influence popular understandings of those idioms.

The third part of our framework concentrates on the substantive policy agendas which PMs' rhetoric is used to justify or explain. PMs have been shown to use different styles of appeal when justifying their policy agendas, often drawing on emotion, appeals to authority or selective presentation of the facts to sideline dissent (Alyeksyeyeva et al. 2021; McCabe 2012: 51–52). However, it is also a PM's role to rhetorically build individual policy programmes into an overall meta-narrative about the kind of social change their government wishes to enact (Grube 2013: 84–86). By framing their justifications using vernacular ideas and language, PMs not only make the policy narrative more palatable to people's existing understandings and values; they may also come to transform which policy programmes are taken to be part of 'the vernacular'.

In proposing this tripartite framework of vernacular rhetoric, we acknowledge that political elites do not give speeches that fit neatly into one category or another. Rather, PMs use a variety of strategies and issues to speak to different audiences and build their cases for change in a nonlinear fashion by mixing ideas and arguments 'contrapuntally' (Myers 2000). Therefore, when we analyse speeches using our framework, each function should not be seen as separate from the others, but as part of an overall strategy that mixes all three dimensions of vernacular rhetoric. By examining the emphasis on and qualitative character of these three vernacular rhetorical functions in speeches, we can better understand how the vernacular is used and what meanings a speaker wishes to attribute to it.

Case selection and methods

We investigated PMs' use of the vernacular in speeches delivered in Australia between 1972 and 1996. Australia during this period is a valuable test of elite use of vernacular rhetoric because of intense conflicts and contestation in all three rhetorical domains of our framework. In terms of partisan competition, a government (Whitlam's) was dismissed for the only time in Australian history following a bitter dispute with opposition parties, who took the unprecedented step of blocking budget bills in the upper house (Emy et al. 1993). In terms of public policy, the period was noted for external economic shocks, social changes and policy shifts that introduced neoliberal principles into Australian public policy (Pusey 1991) and changed the social and economic roles of women (Hancock 1999). At the level of national identity, the period saw the explicitly racist 'White Australia Policy' replaced with an initially bipartisan emphasis on multiculturalism, which then became a source of political division over the role of Australia's location in Asia (Jupp 2007). Despite these significant political and policy issues, the period

has been characterized as lacking in debate and deliberation which engaged with traditional and popularly held values relating to key political and policy shifts. Michael Pusey (1991) emphasizes the role of international policy discourses imported to Australia and championed by bureaucrats, with political leaders often operating as the salespeople for decisions taken in closed rooms. Scholars of rhetoric and discourse have critiqued this view, considering the social change that PMs argued for as core to their own long-standing or evolving ideological beliefs and electoral calculations (Curran 2006; Johnson 2000). However, the extent to which the vernacular was used substantively in this period is understudied.

Our analytical approach focuses on all instances of the use of a phrase drawn from the vernacular in PMs' speeches: 'fair go'. This phrase was chosen because of its long tradition of use in politics and popular culture, strong cultural cachet and because of the wide range of meanings attributed to it since the precolonial period of the 1890s (Howard 2023). Typically, 'the' or 'a' fair go is used to evoke meanings relating to procedural justice, equality of opportunity, egalitarianism, competition and hard work (Horne 1962; Sawer 2003). Similarly to the American Dream idiom, a fair go can be given by others; striven for by individuals; or universalized to encompass a desirable state of affairs in society, as when Australia is described as the 'Land of the Fair Go'. We know that contemporary politicians make regular use of this phrase in areas as diverse as: interviews with journalists, such as when PM Scott Morrison said: 'I believe in a fair go for those who have a go' (Murphy 2019); addresses to parliament like PM Kevin Rudd's apology to the indigenous Stolen Generations: 'reconciliation is in fact an expression of a core value of our nation – and that value is a fair go for all' (Rudd 2008); and even the title of the Australian Labor Party's 2019 election manifesto, the *'Fair Go' Action Plan* (Snow 2018). However, the phrase's changing patterns of use and take-up by political elites has not been systematically measured.

In broad-sweeping historical analyses, authors like Marian Sawer (2003) and Donald Horne (1962) posit the 'fair go' expression as an ingrained part of the political culture associated with ideas of egalitarianism, solidarity and equality of opportunity. Conversely, these principles have often been inconsistently applied to, or actively excluded, women, non-heterosexual, disabled, Indigenous, migrant and non-white people in the context of the colonial-settler state (see for example Moreton-Robinson 2015; Thompson 1994). Others highlight the use of 'fair go' by PMs to contrast a disconnect between rhetoric which appeals to these commonly held values and policy outcomes which fail to address economic inequality or social exclusion (Barry 2017; McMillan 2017). In the latter interpretation, the 'fair go' expression operated as a smokescreen to convince Australians that core policy goals, instruments and settings did not change, despite dramatic shifts in the role of government in this era (Sawer 2003). However, these findings are not based on systematic examinations of PMs' uses of the 'fair go' idiom across a wide range of speeches, possibly setting limits on and underestimating the range of meanings and policy agendas attached to it.

We analysed two sources of elite speech. We examined the Australian Federal Parliament's Hansard records of parliamentary speeches to give a quantitative count of mentions of the 'fair go' phrase by politicians over time. Then, to study qualitatively how PMs used the expression rhetorically, we analysed 125 speeches

given between 1974 and 1996 contained within the Australian government's Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's PMs' speeches archive (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2024). In each speech we analysed how 'fair go' was used to invoke and inscribe meaning upon the vernacular in the process of rhetorical governance. We operationalized these concepts by applying our tripartite framework built from Grube's rhetorical governance model – national identity, policy narratives and partisan competition. As in CDA approaches (van Dijk 1993: 255–256), we took note of PMs' speech venues to assess the character of the audience and what this choice of venue signalled to a broader audience. Finally, we assessed how frequently PMs used the phrase, how central it was to their policy or partisan messaging, and the status the phrase took on, from merely a colourful flourish to mentions of 'fair go' as a tradition of a long-standing and/or guiding principle of public policy.

A case study of 'fair go' across four PMs: elite uptake, versatility and innovation

In the following sections we outline the findings of our case study of the political use of the vernacular 'fair go' by addressing three questions: (1) To what extent and with what variation in usage has the vernacular been taken up by elites and in particular PMs in their rhetoric? (2) To what extent did PMs use the phrase to engage in rhetorical governance by constructing national identities, framing policy narratives and engaging in partisan competition? and (3) Did PMs use the 'fair go' vernacularism as a rhetorical tool to resist change, or as a support for reform and innovation?

Use by elites

Hansard records show elected politicians have been mentioning 'fair go' in an increasing number of speeches over time, with the phrase appearing in 6,912 out of the 1,802,613 records available (or approx. 0.4%). This compares favourably to

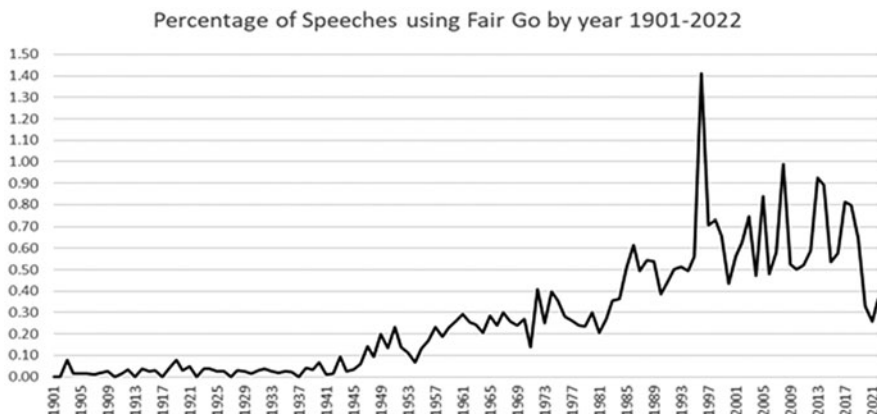


Figure 1. Percentages of Speech Acts Featuring 'Fair Go' Recorded in Hansard, 1901–2022

similar vernacular ‘key words’ of national significance, like ‘Australian Dream’ (660/0.03%) or ‘Lucky Country’ (839/0.04%). [Figure 1](#) shows that the phrase was a relatively infrequent part of parliamentary speech from Federation (1901) until the middle of the twentieth century. It was first used in parliament in 1903 as part of debate around various regions having an equal chance on merit at being chosen as the new national capital. In the 1940s, amid discussion of workers’ rights, nationalization of banking and rent controls, it began to rise, dipped again in the early 1950s, then became more frequent. Usage spiked with the shift from the Keynesian consensus in the early 1970s, trending upwards during the neoliberal era of the 1970s–1990s, while 1996 (the final year of our thematic analysis below) represents the high point of mentions in Hansard. The data show the phrase has continued to be an important resource in parliamentary debate for national politicians.

‘Fair go’ has also taken on a more significant place in the rhetorical outreach strategies of PMs outside of parliament. [Figure 2](#) shows the percentage of speeches featuring ‘fair go’ for each PM from Sir Robert Menzies (1939–1941; 1949–1966) until Scott Morrison (2018–2022) as a proportion of their total speeches. PMs in our earlier period rarely used the phrase. Beginning at the end of the 1960s ‘fair go’ became an established part of PMs’ discourse. By the 1990s–2020s it had taken on a prominent place among PMs’ speeches of both the centre left (Labor) and centre right (Liberal). Whitlam (Labor, 1972–1975) used the phrase in only 11 speeches, or less than 1%; however, it was picked up and repeated by his opponents in contemporary news reporting (see for example *Canberra Times* [1974](#): 16). Fraser (Liberal, 1975–1983) only used ‘fair go’ in public speeches 21 times in seven and a half years. Bob Hawke (Labor, 1983–1991) gave the ‘fair go’ phrase more prominence. Hawke, a former leader of the Australian Council of Trade Unions,

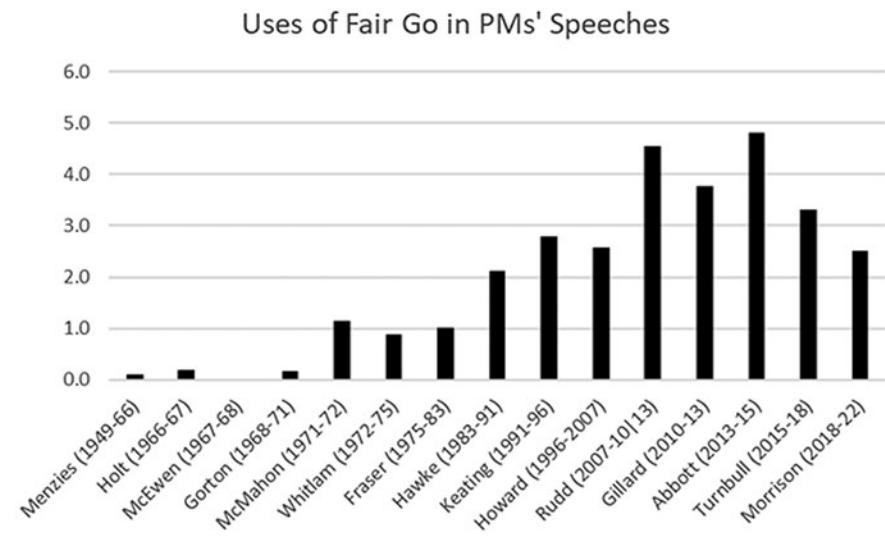


Figure 2. Percentage of PMs’ Speeches Featuring ‘Fair Go’, 1949–2022

was able to deploy a distinctly Australian ‘larrikin’ image of himself as an everyman in keeping with the use of vernacular rhetoric (Coventry 2021). Reflecting this, in his eight years in power the ‘fair go’ phrase was used 48 times (2.1%). Like Hawke, Paul Keating (Labor 1991–1996) also made frequent use of colourful vernacular language (Clark 2013) and used ‘fair go’ 44 times (2.8%) in his six years in office. Use of the ‘fair go’ vernacularism by Australian political elites has trended upwards over time. Despite variation in rates of mentions along partisan lines and between individual PMs, the phrase has clearly been adopted by leaders of governments from both of Australia’s major parties in recent decades. We now turn to explore qualitatively how these PMs used the phrase.

Rhetorical functions

Imagined communities

Each PM in our study used the ‘fair go’ expression to make claims for the inclusion of different social groups in the imagined community of the nation. We expect vernacular rhetoric to be particularly useful for this function. Existing research has shown PMs use Australia Day speeches to delineate their visions of the membership and values which bind together the national community, and they regularly use the ‘fair go’ vernacularism on these occasions (Bromfield and Page 2020). We find that PMs have used the ‘fair go’ phrase to discuss issues of national identity and shared values on other days of the year as well. The moral community evoked by PMs with ‘fair go’ was usually framed in egalitarian terms, being focused on ‘everyday’ workers and their children. Consistent with Nicholas Bromfield and Alexander Page’s findings (2020: 196–198), there are differences in the emphasis of ‘fair go’ rhetoric across party lines. However, whereas in their study all PMs focused on a ‘unifying’ discourse of a classless society, we found distinct visions, and change over time. For example, Whitlam repeated ‘fair go’ many times in attempts to highlight the morally superior imagined community of predominantly male workers and disadvantaged others:

I look to the men of Australia who believe in a fair go – not just a fair go for an elected government, but a fair go for all those of their fellow citizens to whom our policies have brought a new hope, a new chance for a decent life. I look to the women of Australia, who well know what our program has already meant for the future welfare of our children, of our aged, our sick, our handicapped ...¹

By contrast, Fraser’s use of ‘fair go’ delineated the imagined community in line with his anti-socialist but ‘interventionist liberal’ perspective, which sought to reduce the direct role of government in social affairs compared to Whitlam (Curran 2006: 112). Fraser’s Liberal ‘fair go’ therefore held up volunteers and charities as exemplary of these values – by assisting the needy and giving them opportunities without the need for strong government intervention.² Further, in his use of ‘fair go’, Fraser more overtly referred to class dimensions, using the phrase to suggest support for business investors: ‘the man who takes risk with capital to make profit so he can employ more and better trained people must be given a fair go at recovering this profit’.³

Previous scholars have noted that the ‘fair go’ notion was traditionally highly gendered and exclusionary of non-white Australians (Sawer 2003; Thompson 1994). Fraser’s government implemented greater migration from non-European nations and a refugee and resettlement programme for people fleeing wars in Vietnam and Lebanon (Jupp 2007: 39–50). However, it was Hawke who comprehensively linked the idea of inclusion of migrants to the vernacular language of ‘fair go’: ‘We believe that all Australians, irrespective of their ethnic background, their cultural heritage or their linguistic tradition, should be able to exercise their rights and obligations as full and equal members of the community ... We believe all Australians are entitled to a fair go.’⁴ Speeches about multiculturalism made up 12 of Hawke’s 48 ‘fair go’ mentions. Ten of these were given directly to audiences of new migrants at citizenship ceremonies or ethnic community associations and policy launches designed to elicit their participation in governance.⁵ In keeping with PMs’ rhetorical need to speak to multiple audiences simultaneously, ‘fair go’ was used to offer inclusion, while also placing an obligation on new Australians to integrate with the ‘mainstream’ to quell fears of inter-ethnic conflict.

PM Keating also deployed the ‘fair go’ phrase to reinforce the multicultural message. Keating’s ‘fair go’ argued for inclusion of migrants of East Asian backgrounds and to acknowledge the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in a modern Australia, amid a backlash from conservatives. Keating portrayed Australia as a nation unified by a commitment to equality of opportunity, fairness and friendly competition. By drawing on sporting metaphors⁶ and historical examples like the popular folk song ‘Waltzing Matilda’,⁷ and post-World War II migration programmes,⁸ he sought to connect the ‘fair go’ expression to a long tradition of inclusivity and support for ‘underdogs’: ‘I am talking about ideas like a fair go for all, support for the underdog, tolerance of difference, respect for those who by their own efforts have succeeded against the odds.’⁹

In this way workers, including newer migrants, and those who excelled in their fields without putting down others were held up as the ideal citizens. The shared values of a fair go were part of Keating’s attempts to reorient the nation towards a forward-thinking national identity as a trading nation in Asia rather than connected to its white colonial past: ‘The Idea of the “fair go” has been a real force in shaping Australia, including multicultural Australia.’¹⁰ Similarly, in the wake of a High Court determination that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians had legal claims to their traditional lands, Keating used ‘fair go’ in his controversial ‘Redfern Speech’ (Clark 2013). He exhorted listeners to include First Australians in this new national identity: ‘This is a fundamental test of our social goals and our national will ... that we are what we should be truly the land of the fair go and the better chance.’¹¹

The above observations show how PMs sought to utilize the ‘fair go’ vernacular to signal their own affinity to everyday people. They could also use the vernacular and the values associated with it to reach out to previously marginalized groups and argue for their inclusion in the ‘mainstream’ imagined national community. Importantly, contrary to ideas that this might be mere symbolism, PMs were also able to use the vernacular to argue for and shape government policy agendas, and indeed reinforced their vision of the imagined community through these policies. It is to this point that we now turn.

Policy narratives

PMs used 'fair go' to rhetorically justify their policy positions. Whitlam's government was associated with a suite of progressive reforms such as universal health-care, free higher education, income support for single parents and equal pay for women (Emy et al. 1993: 16–31). Therefore, in his 1974 'fair go' speeches he was appealing symbolically to 'everyday workers' while attempting to show how his welfare policies would give them a fair go through expanded equality of opportunity. He continued these themes in subsequent post-election speeches by applying the logic to policies regarding the equitable distribution of federal funding to state and territory governments.¹² Fraser faced the problems of increased unemployment and inflation caused by a global downturn, and domestic factors including a 'wage and price spiral' (Dabscheck and Kitay 1991). Consequently, he took a fiscally conservative policy approach with a rhetorical emphasis on smaller, more efficient government tempered with socially liberal ideology (Mendes 1998). Fraser most frequently used 'fair go' when emphasizing this aspect of his worldview by, for example, linking the phrase to experimental job training for unemployed youth, and support for charitable organizations: 'A further 45,000 young people have been assisted ... young people who have never had a fair go in their whole lives.'¹³

Unlike Whitlam's and Fraser's, Hawke's economic and industrial relations policies were underpinned by a rhetoric of consensus and an 'Accord' between government and unions beginning in 1983. This resulted in less power for individual unions to strike in exchange for a 'social wage' of universal public healthcare and mandatory employer-backed retirement savings (Gardner 1990). Hawke modified Whitlam's use of 'fair go' ideas of fair treatment and reciprocity to implore producers and workers to support free trade: 'We ask for no special privileges from Japan we simply want a fair go.'¹⁴ He further invoked 'fair go' in this way at venues like the 1985 National Taxation Summit to build a bridge between his macroeconomic reform programmes, business and workers, by suggesting that mutual compromise was 'a test of the sincerity of our claims as a nation to be a people who believe in the fair go and the fair sharing of both opportunities and obligations'.¹⁵

Keating, who had served as Hawke's treasurer overseeing the structural adjustment of the economy, succeeded him as PM in a leadership contest in 1991. For some, Keating's use of rhetoric too often focused on 'big pictures', failing to resonate with the electorate's lived experience (Grube 2013: 135; Johnson 2000: 33–34). In our analysis, we find that Keating frequently attempted to connect his government's wide-ranging programmes of policy reform to the vernacular. For example: 'Unemployment will not make us more competitive any more than will running down our health services, or cutting away our social security net, or making access to education less egalitarian, or undermining in any way the policy manifestations of our tradition of the fair go.'¹⁶ Keating delivered these speeches in contexts designed to appeal to a diverse array of 'everyday' rather than elite audiences, such as sporting clubs and events¹⁷ and on talk-back radio.¹⁸

Although they often used it to discuss economic policy, PMs also used 'fair go' rhetoric to give policy effect to their visions for the imagined community in more than purely economic terms (cf. Johnson 2000). For example, Hawke's rhetorical emphasis on multiculturalism was presented alongside a policy agenda of increased funding for language education, ethnic community groups and simpler pathways to

citizenship.¹⁹ Even more directly, ‘fair go’ was one of the three named pillars of his government’s policy to expand the role of women in the economy and society: ‘We are ensuring that women’s needs are taken fully into account in the development and administration of Government policies and programs. Women must have a say, a choice and a fair go and they must have these things regardless of their cultures, language, age or family circumstances.’²⁰ This policy programme instituted the first anti-discrimination laws and modification to labour laws which restricted women’s employment in certain sectors, in line with Johnson’s (2000) idea of Labor privileging economic ideas of participation. However, Hawke’s policies also represented a commitment to political and deliberative inclusion. This commitment was reinforced by appointing Labor’s first female cabinet minister, Susan Ryan, as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women (Mathews 2019: 141–142). This move signalled the new commitment to internal discussion and public discussion on gender policy with Hawke repeating ‘fair go’ at conferences alongside peak bodies in 1985–1990.²¹

Partisan competition

PMs also used the ‘fair go’ phrase to engage in partisan competition. All four PMs attacked opponents painted as being ‘out of touch’ with the values ascribed to fair go. Each PM’s approach was shaped by conflicts of their time and the reforms they were seeking to implement. Whitlam’s time in power was defined as much by political instability and scandal as his ambitious policy agendas, and his ‘fair go’ rhetoric was reflective of his own ‘crash through or crash’ leadership style (Emy et al. 1993). When an intransigent senate blocked reforms, he called an early election in 1974 which marked the beginning of his use of ‘fair go’. He echoed a phrase used a generation earlier by Liberal PM Robert Menzies in 1951: ‘They have done violence to our legislative program. What we ask for is a fair chance to carry out our policy “in the sound Australian phrase, a fair go”.’²²

Whitlam positioned his opponents as hypocritically anti-democratic and opposed to apparently universally held values of democracy championed by their party founder. Whitlam thus suggested a government should be allowed a fair go, as in an opportunity to govern, by the public and the opposition and then judged by its performance.²³ This use of the ‘fair go’ expression to defend the governing party’s right to implement its programmes stands in contrast to subsequent uses, which focused on a fair go for the ordinary citizen. Following Whitlam’s dismissal and subsequent defeat, the phrase was taken up by his opponent Fraser. He incorporated the vernacular to present his party as the only one able to rise ‘above the fray’ and speak for all members of society: the Liberal Party ‘was formed to give average Australians a fair go in a political system that had not always given them a fair go. We are the only Party that can do that.’²⁴

PM Hawke is noted for placing a strong emphasis on class and industrial consensus in his policy and rhetoric (Curran 2006: 126). Nevertheless, he also used ‘fair go’ to paint his political opponents as holding principles which were a ‘complete perversion of the fair go’.²⁵ Opposition to the government’s approach to multiculturalism was presented as evidence of the Liberal Party’s flirtation with racism,²⁶ and opposition to the government’s economic policy an attack on apparently mainstream values of equality and fairness: ‘Our opponents invite you to throw all [the

government's achievements] away, for a tax bribe ... which, if ever seriously attempted, would destroy the economy and rip apart the social fabric, the basis of the Australian ideal of a fair go for all.²⁷

Keating's style gave less credence to ideas of consensus-building and instead used 'fair go' in an aggressive strategy of partisan differentiation. This style made frequent use of metaphorical exaggeration, such as a claim that the Liberals wished to 'kick the working class to death'.²⁸ Keating also put 'fair go' in a central position to compare his own government's approach – presented as modern 'social democracy'²⁹ – to his opponent's apparent adherence to pro-market 'regressive', 'pseudo-scientific' ideals.³⁰ This was characterized as 'unAustralian' and equated to the policies of Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the USA, which were locally unpopular.³¹ For the 1993 election under John Hewson the Liberals introduced a policy programme which advocated stricter welfare conditionality, and a consumption tax which Keating used 'fair go' to attack: 'with Dr Hewson's GST there would be a massive redistribution of income away from average families to the wealthy ... Fair go, Hewson-style'.³²

As well as attacking his opponent's policies as against apparently commonly held 'fair go' values, Keating sought to elevate his own position as that of a defender of tradition: 'The Liberals say ... we're the people who break the traditions. We don't break the traditions, Labor always abides with the traditions mainly because we make most of it ... the traditions of fairness, equity, fair go, pulling people along.'³³

The way these PMs used 'fair go' illustrates the versatility of vernacular idioms for critiquing opponents, while buttressing one's own position – particularly as a champion of the values they portray as resonant with commonly held ideals. Keating also showed that appeals to tradition involve a creative dimension, not merely the drawing upon of a fixed set of meanings, where the 'true' meaning of a tradition is revealed by programmes of reform. We address this creative dimension of vernacular rhetoric in the next section.

Change and innovation

Another theme which emerged from our analysis of PMs' use of the vernacular in the process of rhetorical governance was as an impetus for change and innovation, at two levels: PMs used the vernacular to invite the public to deliberate over future directions, while they also showed how modernizing reforms were a 'natural' extension of traditions they helped to define rhetorically.

PMs Whitlam and Fraser used 'fair go' to invite the public to judge their performance and to explain their positions on contentious issues through national addresses or to the media. Hawke utilized 'fair go' more comprehensively to invite deliberation and policy innovation. He did so by incorporating the vernacular into the titles of policy platforms like his 'A Say, A Choice, and a Fair Go' for women, which funded services on behalf of women and sought to empower them to have 'A Say, which is about involving women in the planning and implementation of policies which will affect them ... [and] a Fair Go which underlines the need for full and equal access to all the opportunities which our society offers'.³⁴ This policy commitment to broader deliberation in society was reinforced symbolically by use of the vernacular in venues and events designed to elicit broad participation.

These included producers and unions at his Taxation Summit, peak bodies at the Conference on Legislative and Award Restrictions to Women's Employment and cultural workers at events like the opening of the Fifth Biennale of Sydney.³⁵ Hawke thus used the vernacular as a tool of inclusion rhetorically to invite contribution from these groups to the governance process as active citizens.

Keating used the 'fair go' to invite a different form of deliberation and innovation by encouraging reflection upon his audiences' place in society, and Australia's place in the world. For example, when addressing the nation while introducing the legislation to give effect to Native Title, Keating used the 'fair go' to pose a series of rhetorical questions to Australians: 'How could we say that we stand for a fair go if we were to wipe away a title to land which has lasted through thousands of years of occupation of the continent and 200 years of European settlement – How could we explain it to Aboriginal Australians? How could we explain it to the world?'³⁶ Keating also sought to use the 'fair go' vernacular to show how his modernizing programmes of reform were not a break with tradition, but a natural extension of a tradition of progressivism: 'Australia's diverse heritage is uniquely our own. So in many respects is our democratic heritage: it includes ... the fabled spirit of the "fair go" and the collective egalitarian tradition.'³⁷

As well as connecting contemporary programmes of reform to the past, he also used the vernacular in the process of innovation and change by suggesting the fair go could be a blueprint for the future: 'when [future generations] are asked what is so good about being an Australian in 2010, they'll say "well, you get a fair go here". It's a birthright like the beaches and the bush and the wide-open spaces.'³⁸ Keating went on to lose the 1996 election decisively, and others have shown how his successor, Liberal PM John Howard, was able to mobilize a rhetoric and discourse of reaction and fear of change using vernacular language (Johnson 2000: 38–39). However, our findings show that PMs can use the vernacular as a set of ideas which elites can use to guide programmes of reform, social change and inclusion.

Discussion and conclusion

Our research advances understandings of elite political uses of vernacular language, both in terms of its rhetorical functions and the use of the vernacular as a vehicle for promoting or opposing change. In the context of neoliberal policy, a phrase like 'fair go' may appear to be hypocritical (Littler 2017), empty (McMillan 2017) or a smokescreen to disguise growing inequality or selectively downplay negative consequences of change. Anthropological studies of vernacular politics have productively drawn attention to the dichotomy between modernizing discourses of reform such as neoliberalism and local or traditional cultural practices that can resist or subvert their implementation (Aronoff and Kubik 2012). Alternatively, for scholars like Skocpol (1985), Briziarelli and Martínez (2016), and White (2003), vernacular cultures are a resource which may be used by political outsiders to guide their revolutionary ideologies or mobilize against establishment elites. Our findings suggest that the vernacular is also useful for incumbent elites and has a greater variety of rhetorical uses than has been acknowledged to date.

The vernacular serves not only as a mechanism to signal the shared values and define the makeup of an imagined community joined by common language

(Anderson 1989; Kymlicka 2001), or to reinforce discourses which justify inequalities and discipline the public to conform to accepted modes of behaviour or identity (Bromfield and Page 2020; Johnson 2000). It can also act as a tool for inviting the public or segments of it to better understand political debates and reflect upon how commonly held values may be pursued more consistently. This is not to say that vernacular rhetoric meets a Platonic ideal of dispassionate reasoned deliberation. Electoral politics tends to be 'Janus-faced' (Stoker 2017: 267), since policy goals like reduced unemployment and equality of opportunity are pursued through combative debate and partisan point scoring. Although Johnson (2000: 150) has suggested Hawke and Keating drew on loose ideological traditions of harmony and consensus to manage political change, our findings show how the vernacular also allowed them to advocate using decidedly inharmonious language. Further, the research has shown that culturally embedded ideas like fairness, egalitarianism, competition and hard work evoked by a phrase like 'fair go' are durable but not static. Contrary to the expectation that vernacular cultures are rooted in slowly changing tradition, in the speeches under investigation, 'fair go' was progressively historicized and given additional layers of normative meanings and cultural depth in a relatively short period. In this way the vernacular is revealed not only as a source of fixed ideological resources (cf. Skocpol 1985), but also as something which is given meaning by and through its usage in concrete political competition and policy debate.

In this article we have shown how PMs made use of the vernacular in one era and country using a popular phrase. We argue that scholars of public deliberation and the politics of policymaking should give greater attention to the way elite actors like PMs incorporate and redefine the language through which public reasoning unfolds. This creative historicizing and definitional work are bound up in the search for power. However, if we dismiss the words elected politicians use as purely strategic and vernacular cultures as necessarily fixed and resistant to programmes of reform, we diminish our understanding of the political and policy implications of idioms in the context of rhetorical governance. Our findings should also give pause to those on the left and right who assume the vernacular is primarily a resource for local opposition to global ideas and elite agendas. Although elite invocations of the vernacular have been dismissed as cynical smokescreens, it is also possible for political leaders to use political idioms to promote a more deliberative politics which is grounded in and helps to define the public's engagement with politics.

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Notes

1 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3254>.

2 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-4834>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-4707>.

- 3 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-4333>.
- 4 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7167>.
- 5 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7136>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7167>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7186>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7220>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7443>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7467>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7723>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7525>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7690>.
- 6 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8504>.
- 7 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9540>.
- 8 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8656>.
- 9 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9116>.
- 10 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9910>.
- 11 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8765>.
- 12 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3948>.
- 13 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-4834>.
- 14 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-6350>.
- 15 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-6663>.
- 16 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9072>.
- 17 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9579>.
- 18 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9150>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9229>.
- 19 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7690>.
- 20 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7936>.
- 21 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-6794>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7016>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7296>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-736>.
- 22 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3207>.
- 23 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3215>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3247>.
- 24 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-5931>.
- 25 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7682>.
- 26 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7723>.
- 27 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7189>.
- 28 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9797>.
- 29 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9066>.
- 30 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8656>.
- 31 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8558>.
- 32 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8658>.
- 33 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-8614>.
- 34 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7296>.
- 35 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-6663>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7016>; <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-6360>.
- 36 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9037>.
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