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Policy Agendas in Australian Politics: The Governor-General's Speeches, 1945–2008

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The Policy Agendas Project collects and organises data from official documents to trace changes in the policy agenda and outputs of national, sub-national and supranational governments. In this paper we use the policy agendas method to analyse the changing contents of those Australian Governor-General's speeches delivered on behalf of incoming governments between 1945 and 2008. We suggest that these speeches provide an important insight into how the executive wishes to portray its policy agenda as it starts a new term of government. In mapping the changing agenda in this way we address four questions: which issues have risen or fallen in importance? When and in relation to what issues have there been policy 'punctuations'? How stable is the Australian policy agenda? How fragmented is the policy agenda? We find evidence of a number of policy punctuations and one turning-point: the election of the Whitlam government.

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Introduction

The policy agenda is the list of subjects or problems to which society pays serious attention at any given time (Kingdon 1984, 3), some of which make it on to the government's agenda. Government faces an abundance of information about the state of the world as issues compete for space on the policy agenda. Agenda-setting – the study of which issues make it on to the policy agenda and why – has been the subject of extensive theoretical and empirical research (see Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Cobb and Elder 1972; Downs 1972; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Kingdon 1984; Schattschneider 1960). The Policy Agendas Project (PAP) builds on this work by collecting and organising data from public sources to map changes in the national governmental policy agenda. It began in the US, with the coding of most aspects of Presidential and Congressional agenda and policy making since 1900 using a standardised codebook (see http://www.policyagendas.org/). In subsequent years the approach has gained favour in comparative studies, and the Comparative Agendas Project now includes 14 jurisdictions within its ambit (John 2006).

This paper constitutes the first application of the policy agendas method to the study of Australian politics. In it we analyse the changing contents of Governor-Generals' (GG) speeches to the Australian Parliament. There have been 35 speeches since 1945. We focus upon the 26 speeches delivered at the opening of a new Parliament following a federal election. These speeches are written by the newly elected government and offer an overview of what the incoming government regards as its policy agenda. As we emphasise in what follows, the GG speech is a formal occasion and that affects the nature of the speech given. Speeches are generally non-partisan affairs but for political reasons a government may nevertheless decide to downplay the significance of a policy announcement. However governments must choose which issues to prioritise in this speech and the length of time devoted to each issue can be seen as a measure of its importance to the incoming government. Thus changes in the content of the speech provide a simple measure of changes in the executive's policy agenda on entering or re-entering office. To be sure, governments' agendas change as issues arise during the course of its term of office, and some of their intended actions might be downgraded or knocked off the agenda by events. Furthermore, since governments' do not reveal the details of any policy, we cannot extract from the GG speech a comprehensive account of the government's policy intentions. Nevertheless by tracing changes in the GG speech over time we can see how the policy agenda in Australia, at least as it is viewed by incoming governments, has changed. This empirical project constitutes a first step towards a more comprehensive study of the Australian national policy agenda that will examine actual legislation, expenditures in different areas and media coverage of the policy agenda.

The Policy Agendas Project

The PAP collects longitudinal data on policy agenda from various sources to examine policy change. Baumgartner and Jones' original study (1993) used a standardised code book which constructed the policy agenda in terms of 19 major policy codes and more than 250 policy sub-categories. These same codes (with

some country variation) have now been used in many different countries as part of the Comparative Agendas Project (http://www.comparativeagendas.org/). The advantage of the policy agendas method is that the use of a standardised code book makes possible extensive historical and comparative research (see Baumgartner, Jones and MacLeod (1998), for a discussion of the origins of these categories and coding procedures and John (2006, 10–11) for a discussion of the assumptions of the PAP). The major policy codes are shown in Table 1.

The general theoretical idea behind PAP is that governments face continual demands to address issues and they must *choose* which issues to prioritise. The PAP assumes that governments devote more attention to those issues they wish to prioritise. If, at the beginning of a term of office, the GG speech contains a lengthy discussion of the challenges posed by climate change but only a few passing allusions to transport then this is because the government, for whatever reason, has decided that climate change is a greater priority than transport. Thus changes over time in the GG speech can tell us what governments are publicly prioritising on entering office. The measure does not tell us the precise content of the policy, nor in what ideological spaces it is placed, but it indicates the relative importance government gives to policy topics.

The assumption that the level of attention paid to an issue is indicative of the priority attached to it is not uncontroversial. At times a significant policy issue may only be the subject of a few well-chosen words and a key policy announcement. On other occasions governments may deliberately downplay some issues in order to minimise political conflict. Alternatively, they may devote a great deal of attention to other more marginal issues if they are low cost and popular. For this reason, proponents of the policy agendas method recognise the need to supplement quantitative measures with interviews and detailed case studies (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Pralle 2003; Resodihardjo 2009; Walgrave and Varone 2008). In an important sense therefore the data we

Table 1. The 19 Major Policy Codes

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties
3. Health
4. Agriculture
5. Labour, Employment and Immigration
6. Education and Culture
7. Environment
8. Energy
10. Transportation
12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues
13. Social Welfare
14. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
15. Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16. Defence
17. Space, Science, Technology and Communications
18. Foreign Trade
19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20. Government Operations
21. Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues

Note: There are no Codes 9 and 11.

report on here is only the preliminary step in the process of analysing changes in the Australian policy agenda.

The Governor-General's Speech

The Governor-General is the Queen's representative in Australia and performs a number of constitutional and statutory duties, formal ceremonial duties and non-ceremonial social duties, one of which is to deliver a keynote speech on behalf of the government. *Odger's Senate Practice* (Evans 2008, 144) describes the speech as follows.

> At the designated time (usually 3 pm) the Senate resumes and the Governor-General is announced. The Governor-General then summons the Members of the House of Representatives to the Senate chamber. When the members of the House of Representatives have assembled in the Senate chamber the Governor-General delivers the opening speech, in which the causes of calling the Parliament together are declared. The speech, which is composed by the ministry, usually reviews recent events and gives a summary of the government's legislative program of the session. Upon completion of the reading of the speech by the Governor-General, the President and the Speaker each receive a copy of the speech from a member of the Governor-General's staff. The Governor-General then retires.

Since 1974 these speeches have always been delivered at the opening of a new Parliament following a federal general election. Previously, a number of speeches – those in 1948, 1957, 1958, 1960, 1961, 1968, February 1974 and 1977 – had been delivered mid-term; usually timed to coincide with the appointment of a new Senate or, in the case of the 1974 and 1977 speeches, a Royal Visit by Queen Elizabeth. The dates and lengths of all the speeches, together with the name of the Governor-General who delivered them and the Prime Minister of the government on whose behalf it was delivered are shown in Table 2. Our analysis focuses exclusively upon the 26 speeches delivered following a federal general election. Otherwise we would have been comparing speeches some of which were three years apart and some of which were just one year apart and enables us to compare the agenda of the newly elected governments rather than ones mid-term.[1]

The GG's speech is written by the Prime Minister and delivered on his or her behalf. The GG has no influence over the policy content of the speech. Peter

[1]We have also excluded from our analysis the 186 word holding speech delivered by Paul Hasluck in November 1969. The March 1970 speech was delivered nearly 6 months after the 1969 election and following the November 1969 holding speech. The March speech is nevertheless included in our analysis for two reasons. Firstly, because it was only delivered a few months later than some other speeches (there was a three month gap between the November 2007 election and Rudd's February 2008 speech and between the November 2001 election and John Howard's February 2002 speech. Secondly, excluding this speech would have left a six year gap in the data between Holt's 1967 speech and Whitlam's 1973 speech. This would have risked skewing the analysis.

Table 2. Governor-General's Speeches

Date delivered	Governor-General	Prime Minister	Speech after lower house election?	Length of speech (words)
21 Feb 1945	Henry Albert	John Curtin (Lab)	No	3460
6 Nov 1946	Henry Albert	Ben Chifley (Lab)	Yes	2810
1 Sep 1948	William McKell	Ben Chifley (Lab)	No	3320
22 Feb 1950	William McKell	Robert Menzies (Lib)	Yes	3150
12 June 1951	William McKell	Robert Menzies (Lib)	Yes	3590
4 Aug 1954	William Slim	Robert Menzies (Lib)	Yes	2530
15 Feb 1956	William Slim	Robert Menzies (Lib)	Yes	2890
19 March 1957	William Slim	Robert Menzies (Lib)	No	2925
25 Feb 1958	William Slim	Robert Menzies (Lib)	No	2863
17 Feb 1959	William Slim	Robert Menzies (Lib)	Yes	3599
8 March 1960	William Morison	Robert Menzies (Lib)	No	2754
7 March 1961	William De L'Isle	Robert Menzies (Lib)	No	2883
20 Feb 1962	William De L'Isle	Robert Menzies (Lib)	Yes	3490
25 Feb 1964	William DeL'Isle	Robert Menzies (Lib)	Yes	3642
21 Feb 1967	Richard Casey	Harold Holt (Lib)	Yes	3394
12 March 1968	Richard Casey	John Gorton (Lib)	No	3217
25 Nov 1969	Paul Hasluck	John Gorton (Lib)	Yes	186
3 March 1970	Paul Hasluck	John Gorton (Lib)	Yes	4626
27 Feb 1973	Paul Hasluck	Gough Whitlam (Lab)	Yes	4513
28 Feb 1974	Queen Elizabeth II	Gough Whitlam (Lab)	No	2456
9 July 1974	Paul Hasluck	Gough Whitlam (Lab)	Yes	3630
17 Feb 1976	John Kerr	Malcolm Fraser (Lab)	Yes	3972
8 March 1977	Queen Elizabeth II	Malcolm Fraser (Lib)	No	948
21 Feb 1978	Zelman Cowen	Malcolm Fraser (Lib)	Yes	3322
25 Nov 1980	Zelman Cowen	Malcolm Fraser (Lib)	Yes	2567
21 April 1983	Ninian Stephen	Bob Hawke (Lab)	Yes	4260
21 Feb 1985	Ninian Stephen	Bob Hawke (Lab)	Yes	3950
14 Sep 1987	Ninian Stephen	Bob Hawke (Lab)	Yes	4450
8 May 1990	William Hayden	Bob Hawke (Lab)	Yes	4020
4 May 1993	William Hayden	Paul Keating (Lab)	Yes	7615
30 April 1996	William Deane	John Howard (Lib)	Yes	2330
10 Nov 1998	William Deane	John Howard (Lib)	Yes	3710
12 Feb 2002	Peter Hollingworth	John Howard (Lib)	Yes	3059
16 Nov 2004	Michael Jeffrey	John Howard (Lib)	Yes	3060
12 Feb 2008	Michael Jeffrey	Kevin Rudd (Lab)	Yes	4031

Boyce (2008) who has written a definitive account of the *Crown and its Legacy in Australia, Canada and New Zealand* suggests:

> The speech is exclusively the handiwork of the PM's office. Occasionally a GG has been known to suggest a modest re-wording of a phrase or two before delivery, but there can be no exercise of discretion by the GG. By long-standing convention the Queen's representative must discharge this duty on advice, just as she or he must give the royal assent to bills passed by parliament. (pers. commun., 1 February 2010, quoted with the author's permission)

For ease of exposition we therefore often identify a speech using the name of the Prime Minister on whose behalf it was delivered.

The basic structure of the GG speech has not changed significantly. Speeches often start with a paean to the democratic process or, when appropriate, to a recent and tragic national or international event. Kevin Rudd's 2008 speech acknowledges the traditional owners of the land and argues that, 'regardless of any partisan affiliation, all Australians can celebrate the success of our democracy'. Most speeches then provide a short overall summary of the government's priorities before discussing each of the items on this list in greater detail. In 1954 Menzies listed these priorities as strengthening Australia's security, the maintenance of a healthy economy, the development of natural resources and the social welfare of the Australian people. In 2008 Rudd had a longer list composed of: economic management, economic reform, work and family, education, health, climate change and water, housing, social inclusion, indigenous policy, national security and international relations and governance and transparency. Speeches tend to avoid partisan comments about the opposition. The speeches of re-elected governments tend to describe past achievements as well as future plans. Those of newly elected governments tend to be exclusively forward-looking.

Speeches include references to proposed legislation. The descriptions are, however, usually quite general. Howard's 1998 speech is typical in promising 'legislation to reduce the burden of unfair dismissal laws, including the exemption of small business from the unfair dismissal procedures of the Workplace Relations Act'. Speeches are also used to highlight proposed tax and public expenditure changes. Howard's 2004 speech promises a 'mature age worker tax offset to make it more financially attractive for older Australians to remain in work', whilst his 2002 speech promises an additional A$32bn on defence expenditure, $1.7bn on improved incentives for people on welfare to take paid work, $3bn on strengthening links between science and business, $1bn on improving regional communications and $1bn on greenhouse gas abatement. Speeches are also used to signpost new policy priorities. Rudd's 2008 speech, for example, commits the government to 'working closely with states and territories to achieve a better integration of preventative health care to tackle challenges such as obesity and chronic disease' without specifying how this will be achieved. Finally, speeches are used to draw attention to proposed policy changes which do not require legislation. Rudd's 2008 speech promised to improve and expand the Commonwealth Scholarships program for undergraduate and postgraduate students to include new four-year fellowships. Unlike the budget speech which is delivered by the Treasurer each year and focuses largely – although not exclusively – on economic matters, the GG's speech has a broad policy focus.

The GG's speech has a similar character to speeches made by the head of state on behalf of the executive in many countries. These speeches have been used as a source of information about changes in the executive's policy agenda (Breeman et al. 2009; Jennings and John 2009; Jennings, Bevan and John forthcoming; John, Larsen and Liu 2006; John et al. 2010; Mortensen et al. 2010). Unlike the GG's speeches, many of these are annual addresses or lay out a detailed legislative program for legislative sessions. However, like all the speeches, the GG's address provides an important source of information about the government's policy agenda.

A government might use a head of state's speech for one or more of a number of purposes. It might be used to make credible commitments to specific pieces of

legislation, helping the government keep its promises. It might be used to set the tone for the government, laying out a radical new set of priorities or re-affirming its previous priorities. It might be a response to issues that have arisen, perhaps in the run-up to and during the election campaign, or it might be used to appeal to a specific section of the electorate. As political documents written by elected officials they might not just reflect policy priorities, but also political ones. So some issues might be overstressed to give the illusion of interest or priority whilst others are almost ignored even though the Prime Minister wants action. Governments can use executive speeches to set the tone for the national debate however (Canes-Wrone 2001; 2005; Kernell 1997) and to emphasise promises for which it later intends to claim credit (Bara 2005; Strøm 2000). An incoming radical government might use the speech to reassure the public that old priorities also remain. Or it might be used by a more conservative Prime Minister to bolster their appeal to the more radical or core elements of his party after an election victory. In other words executive speeches like that delivered by the GG in Australia might be used for a series of strategic purposes that may not reflect all the intentions of the incoming government but will surely reflect some of them.

The policies adopted by governments emanate from numerous sources. Many are simply the continuation or modification of past policies. Policy inheritance is the idea that a lot of governmental legislation is 'normal politics' and that the individual party and personalities involved might make little difference to policy outputs which depend more on the policies governments inherit from their predecessors (Richardson and Jordan 1979; Rose and Davies 1994). Some policies however, are ideologically based and pursued in the quest to transform society (Blais, Blake and Dion 1993; Imbeau, Petry and Lamari 2001). Such policies are party or actor preference based. Some might be based upon crises that suddenly arise such as Howard's 1996 gun law in response to the Port Arthur massacre, or Rudd's response to the global financial crisis. Others occur because of creeping crises (Rosenthal, Charles and t'Hart 1989; Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer 2003, ch. 3). The electorate might favour one party on some issues, and another on other issues. Issue ownership thus becomes an important agenda setting priority and the governing party will try to seize the agenda on those issues on which they are must trusted (Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge 1994). At other times government responds to public or media pressure, and might have to respond to the opposition if the latter can seize the agenda.

Some of the radical turns in policy attention which have occurred may not be captured by analysing the GG speech. Unless an acute crisis occurs in the run-up to an election or becomes an ongoing feature of the political landscape, it is less likely to feature in the GG speech. The 'children-overboard' incident was a headline political issue between 2001 and at least 2004 (Keating 2003; Marr and Wilkinson 2003; Weller 2002). Yet there are no direct references to it in either the 2002 or 2004 speeches. It would be unusual for an incoming government that has just won an election to feel the need to bow to media pressure and certainly that is not the time when the opposition can seize the agenda. What we expect to find therefore in analysing the GG speech is not all the turns and trends in the actual policy agenda of governments, but the tone that a government wants to set at the beginning of its new term of office. That tone

might not always reflect the actual policies subsequently pursued. However, comparing the agendas of governments over time at the beginning of their terms of office will reveal the ways in which governments wished to portray themselves on taking office.

In analysing the contents of the GG speech we employed the same 19 major policy codes used within the PAP. A small number of changes were made to the way in which the policy sub-categories were coded. First, we created a number of additional sub-categories for immigration and refugees: composition (relating to the racial and territorial background of refugees); assimilation; and refugees (relating to the right to asylum, processing of claims for asylum detention and housing and resettlement). Second, we also created additional sub-categories for Indigenous issues under the major policy code of public lands, water management and colonial and territorial issues: General (budget estimates, requests and appropriations for indigenous affairs, economic aid to indigenous populations or regions, law enforcement in indigenous communities, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in custody and reconciliation); land rights; political and legal rights; and standards of living and community well-being (a copy of the full code book is available upon request).

Each speech was then blind-coded at the quasi-sentence level by two research assistants; first to ascertain whether any given statement contained any policy content and then which major topic code *and* sub-topic code to assign to each statement. A quasi-sentence (or policy statement) constitutes an expression of a single policy idea or issue. As the name suggests a quasi-sentence need not be a complete sentence (see Volkens 2002). Generally this unit of analysis is identifiable from the use of punctuation and conjunctions. The procedure of double coding led to 95% inter-coder reliability for most years. The coders resolved remaining differences through discussion and one of the lead authors made the final decision in the few cases where coders did not agree. In total, the coding exercise took around 80 hours. Figure 1 shows the total number of coded policy statements in each speech. The total number of statements is, on each occasion, slightly higher than the total number of policy statements because each speech contained a number of very general statements which it was not appropriate to code.[2] The number of statements in each speech is closely related to the length of the speech. The average length of all the speeches is 3,500 words. There were more policy statements in Keating's 1993 speech because it was 7,600 words long. There were fewer policy statements in Fraser's 1990 speech and Howard's 1996 speeches because they were relatively short: 2,500 and 2,300 words respectively (see Table 2).

We frame our analysis of a government's policy agenda as revealed through the GG speech in terms of four questions:

(1) Which policy issues have risen or fallen in importance?
(2) When and in relation to what issues have there been policy 'punctuations'?
(3) How stable is the Australian policy agenda?
(4) How fragmented is the policy agenda?

[2]The raw data is available upon request from Hindmoor.

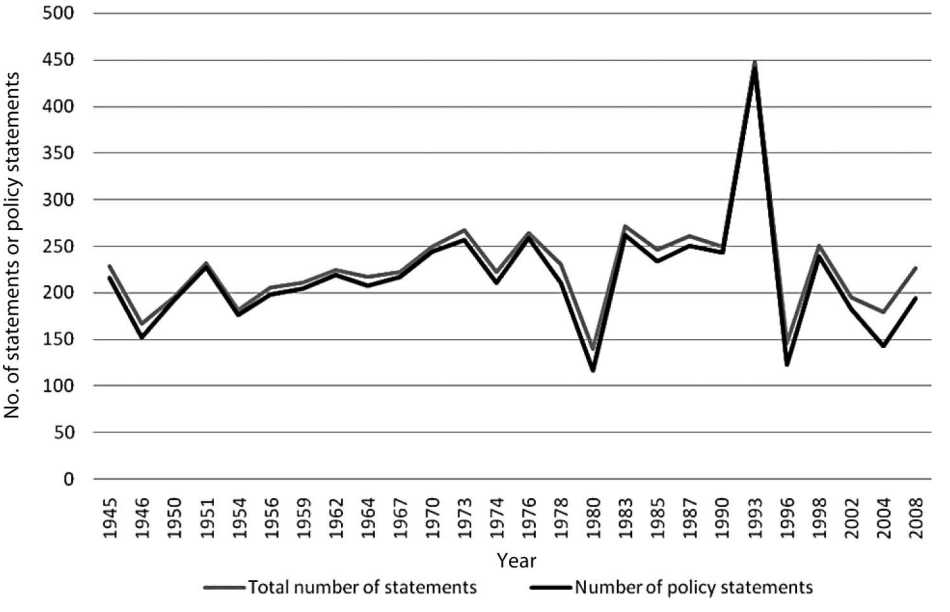

Figure 1. Number of Policy Statements in Governor-General's Speeches, 1945–2008.

Which Policy Issues Have Risen or Fallen in Importance?

Our first task was to map the overall shape of a government's policy agenda as seen at the start of each government. Since the speeches are of different lengths the importance of each issue is not the amount devoted to it *per se* but the proportion of the speech it consumes. So having coded the content of each speech, the attention devoted to each of the 19 major policy codes was then re-estimated as a proportion of the total speech – so controlling for variations in length of speech. Figure 2 shows the results of this process for each policy area. In each case the vertical axis shows the proportion of the attention devoted to that topic in any one particular speech on a scale ranging from 0% to 40%.

Four trends stand out. The first is the enduring significance of macro-economic issues. 14% of the content of speeches has, on average, been devoted to macroeconomic issues. The lowest proportion was 6% in 1959 and the highest 26% in 1980 (figures cited here have been rounded to the nearest whole number). Attention to macroeconomic issues has increased over time. In 11 speeches between 1946 and 1973 the attention to macroeconomics averaged 11%. In the 14 speeches since then attention has averaged 15%. There is, however, some evidence here that attention to macroeconomics has waned. In the 2002, 2004 and 2008 speeches attention averaged 11%. Proportionately less attention was devoted to macroeconomics in 2008 than in any speech since 1959.

One initially counter-intuitive finding here relates to the 1990s recession. In the economically troubled 1970s and early 1980s attention to macroeconomic issues predictably rose from 7% in 1973 to 20% in 1976 and a high of 26% in 1980. In the more economically settled year of 1987 only 14% of the Hawke's speech was devoted to macroeconomics. Yet as economic conditions then

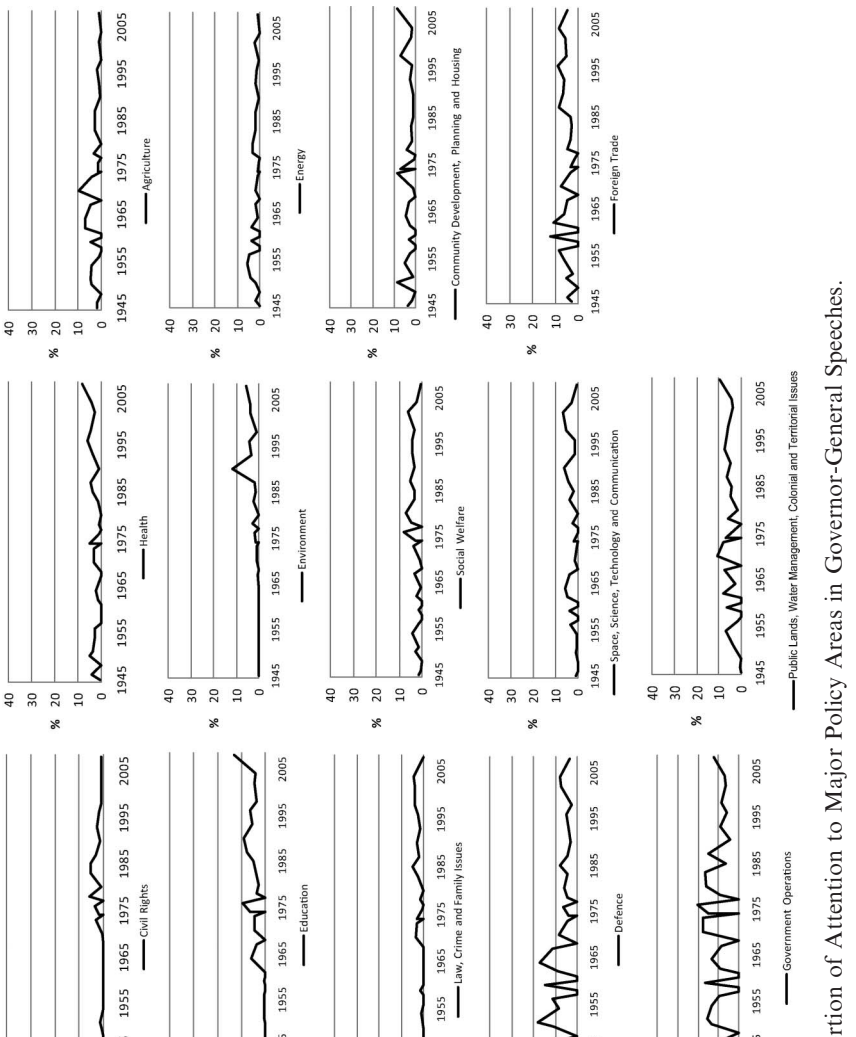

Figure 2. Proportion of Attention to Major Policy Areas in Governor-General Speeches.

deteriorated attention to macroeconomics nevertheless fell to 11% in the 1990 and 1993 speeches. There is an important lesson here. A government's agenda will often change in relation to external events. This explains the rise in attention to macroeconomics in the late 1970s. Governments do not, however, simply passively respond to external events. They can choose which issues to emphasise. It would appear that in 1990 and 1993 the government wanted to highlight issues other than the recession for which it was being widely blamed.

A second trend is a growth in the attention devoted to health, education and social welfare. In the 11 speeches between 1946 and 1973 these three issues accounted for a combined average of 6% of the government's attention. In the 10 speeches between 1983 and 2008 this rose to 14%. Rudd's 2008 speech is, in this regard, particularly noteworthy. In 2004 John Howard devoted 4% of his speech to health and education and 2% to social welfare. In 2008 Kevin Rudd devoted 8% of his speech to health, 13% to education and 5% to social welfare. Rudd devoted a larger proportion of his attention to education than any previous Prime Minister. There is an interesting parallel here between Rudd and Tony Blair. Following Blair's election in 1997 he moved attention away from economics and international affairs to social policy issues. Prior to his election Blair promised to abide by Conservative public spending plans and, in the longer term, to maintain a positive budget balance over the economic cycle whilst re-invigorating Britain's public services. The attention devoted to health and education within the annual Queen's speech subsequently rose, on average, from 8% and 5% respectively between 1992 and 1996 to 9% and 18% between 1997 and 2000 (John and Jennings 2010). Judging by the contents of his first GG speech, Rudd pursued a similar agenda-setting strategy once entering office.

A third trend relates to the growing salience of labour, employment and immigration issues on the policy agenda under both Labor and Coalition governments during the last few decades. The turning-point here seems to come with the election of Gough Whitlam in December 1972. Under successive Liberal governments, labour, employment and immigration issues had largely fallen from the agenda. In 1967 only 2% of Holt's speech was devoted to these issues. Whitlam devoted 9% of his 1973 speech to this issue and attention has not fallen below 8% since 1976.

Whilst macroeconomics fluctuates, attention to both social and labour issues had increased, implying that attention to some other issues must have fallen. Here the final trend relates to the decline in attention paid to agriculture, defence and, at least in the 1980s and 1990s, foreign affairs. Looking first at agriculture, the turning-point comes, once again, with Whitlam. Agriculture had never been a major policy issue but nevertheless consumed 9% of Gorton's 1970 speech. This fell to 4% in Whitlam's 1973 speech since which time it has not risen. This withdrawal of attention has of course been matched by a withdrawal of government support (Botterill 2005; Productivity Commission 2010, 15). Attention paid to foreign affairs and defence has obviously varied in response to external events. In the case of foreign affairs, attention rose significantly during the Suez conflict (29% of Menzies' 1957 speech),[3] the

[3]Otherwise excluded from analysis as the speech was given 15 months after the previous general election.

Vietnam War (27% of Holt's 1967 speech shortly after the deployment of Australian troops) and the Iraq war (16% of Howard's 2004 speech). Once again, though, there is a case for viewing the election of the Whitlam government as a turning point. Between 1946 and 1970 international affairs and defence consumed, on average, 18% of attention. Between 1973 and 2008 this fell to 8%. It is worth noting that Whitlam stands out here not because his government seems unique, but that GG speeches were not the same after Whitlam as they were before. His government constitutes a turning point. We discuss this finding in more detail below.

The discussion so far has been focused upon the 19 major policy codes. One significant finding relating to one of the policy sub-categories is worth separately reporting. Figure 3 shows the proportion of attention devoted to Indigenous issues (the categories for which have already been listed). It shows that whilst attention has gradually increased over time, it is only in 1993 and 2008 that Indigenous issues formed a significant part of the executive's agenda as articulated in the GG speech.

We can see therefore that whilst there are some fluctuations based upon external events there are noticeable trends in policy agendas over the period. Not surprisingly social issues such as education and health have come to play a larger role in the GG speeches, less obviously employment and immigration have also played a larger role. Agriculture has been downgraded and whilst Indigenous affairs are more important than they once were, they are still peripheral. Given the amount of attention that has seemingly been given to Indigenous affairs, and to immigration in public discussion, policy attention and political debate, and the importance of immigration and asylum issues in elections (see for example McAllister 2003) we need to explain why relatively little attention is devoted to them in GG speeches. One reason we have already discussed is that there is as a problem with seeing GG speeches as signals of policy attention. Rather they are signals that governments can use deliberatively both to focus and divert attention. Given the contentious nature of

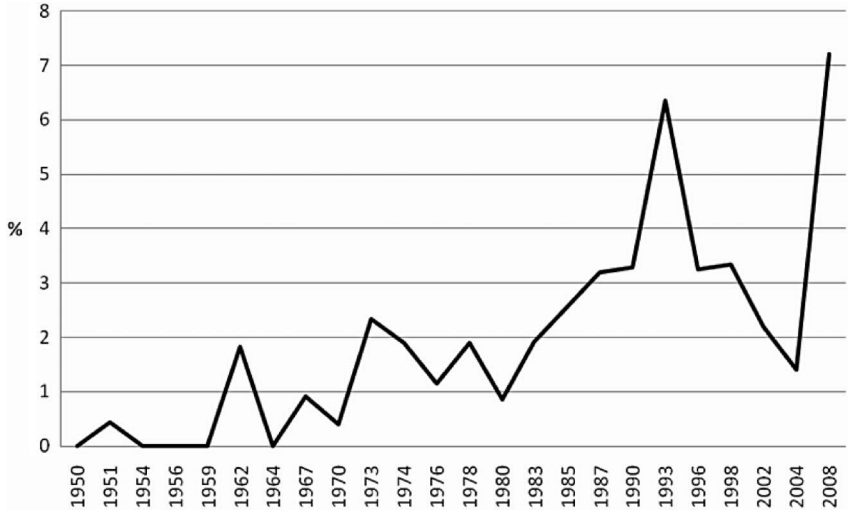

Figure 3. Attention to Indigenous Issues.

immigration and Indigenous affairs a number of governments may have chosen to avoid emphasising them in their GG speech. Furthermore, whilst these are important issues for the country, they have not always been considered matters of State, or central in the manner of economics, health, welfare, education. Rather they might be seen as more peripheral 'problems' that have to be dealt with. In that regard we might note that because such issues are not considered central they might not occupy the attention of the most dynamic, competent and ambitious politicians (and public servants) which might, in some small way, help explain why they have remained problems. Finally, Whitlam stands out as a time when the policy agenda shifted and Rudd also seems to have had an effect, though obviously it is too soon to tell whether this marks a permanent shift in policy attention or whether Rudd's agenda shift might be related to his sudden demise.

When and in Relation to What Issues Have There Been 'Policy Punctuations'?

One of the consistent results found in PAP and the Comparative Agendas Project is that agendas are subject to policy punctuations. A 'policy punctuation' is a sudden moment of rapid policy change following a long period of incremental agenda change. Issues that have been dormant or subject only to incremental change might rise to the top of the policy agenda, perhaps because of creeping crises or perhaps due to new ideas finding their way to the top of the agenda through personnel change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Baumgartner, Jones and MacLeod 2000; Jones, Sulkin and Larsen 2003; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). A simple visual inspection of Figure 2 immediately reveals two such punctuations in Australia: civil rights in the 1970s and the environment in the late 1980s.

In the 1950s and 1960s civil rights, minority issues and civil liberties – the sub-categories of which are ethnic minority and racial group discrimination, gender and sexual orientation discrimination, age discrimination, handicap or disease discrimination, voting rights and issues, freedom of speech and religion, the right to privacy and access to government information and anti-government activities – simply did not register on the policy agenda. These issues accounted for 3% of Whitlam's 1973 speech, 4% of Fraser's first speech in 1976 and nearly 6% of his 1978 speech. Since 1980 civil rights has accounted for an average of 2% of attention.

There is an important issue here relating to the coding of speeches. Our data measures changes in the attention devoted to issues. It does not measure changes in the *content* of policy or changes in policy tools. In his 1976 and 1978 speeches, Fraser, like Whitlam, devoted considerable attention to civil rights issues. The kind of issues he raised were however, very different from those of Whitlam. In 1973 the Whitlam government promised 'equal rights under the law for all Australians', the ratification of international conventions on the elimination of racial discrimination and a Freedom of Information Bill to 'make government in Australia more open and less secret, and to involve the people in the decision-making processes'. In 1976 Fraser also promised to introduce a Freedom of Information Bill but also emphasised industrial relations 'legislation to protect the rights of individuals and the community'. The rights-based language used by Whitlam and Fraser was very similar. Their

policies were very different. Nevertheless, though different governments might have chosen a dramatically different content in some policy area, the fact they feel the need to devote time to that agenda item is still significant.

Figure 2 also reveals punctuation in the attention devoted to environmental issues in the late 1980s. In Hawke's first three election speeches in 1983 (2%), 1985 (1%) and 1987 (2%), the environment was largely invisible. Following an election campaign in which Labor actively sought the support of Green votes, the environment consumed 11% of the 1990 speech. It is not a revelation that there was a surge of interest in environmental issues in the late 1980s (Kelly 1992, 524–43). What is perhaps more surprising is that it was Keating and not Howard who dropped the issue from the agenda. In 1993 just 3% of Keating's first speech was devoted to the environment.

Table 3 identifies a number of other punctuations in the policy agenda. We identify 19 issues for which attention *increased* by more than 250% between two speeches and where the total level of attention devoted to the issue in the second speech exceeded 3%. The second of these criteria was imposed to exclude issues where the initial level of attention was so low that a 250% increase in attention was secured without the issue forming a significant part of the agenda.[4]

We previously identified the election of the Whitlam government as a turning-point in the attention devoted to labour, employment and immigration issues, agriculture and international affairs. Table 3 suggests a similar conclusion. Of 18 punctuations in the agenda, seven occurred in the 1970s and four of these occurred under Whitlam. Our data thus confirm in terms of the expectations engendered in his GG speech, that the Whitlam government engineered a decisive change in the policy agenda that still has reverberations today.

How Stable Is the Australian Policy Agenda?

Table 3 tells us that, with respect to specific issues, the election of the Whitlam government was a decisive, agenda-changing, moment. But the focus on specific issues here might be misleading. What can we say about the overall impact of different governments upon the policy agenda? How stable has the policy agenda been over time? Measuring stability is not a straightforward exercise. Any increase in attention devoted to one issue implies a decrease in at least one other. But does an increase in one issue that leads to a corresponding decrease in one other issue mean more stability than a correspondingly smaller decrease in two issues? The answer is not obvious. Ideally we would like a single measure of stability over set periods of time – say 40-year periods – to compare across countries. There are a number of theoretical and practical problems in producing such a single number. Rather than attempt such an exercise we use Sigelman and Buell's (2004) measure of issue convergence between candidates in an election campaign as a measure of agenda stability between any two periods (also see Mortensen et al. 2010). The amount of divergence between conjoint pairs of speeches can then be examined over a period of time to see the

[4]Between February 1973 and July 1974, for example, the attention devoted to space, science and technology issues rose by more than 400% from 0.3% to 1.8%. This does not however constitute a significant punctuation.

Table 3. Policy Punctuations

40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s	00s
Health (1945–6)	Community development, planning and housing issues (1946–50)	Social welfare (1964–7)	Civil rights (1970–3)	Civil rights (1980–3)	Environment (1987–90)	Environment (1998–2002)
Labour, Employment and immigration (1945–6)	Community development, planning and housing issues (1951–4)		Labour, employment and immigration (1970–3)		Health (1990–3)	Community development, planning and housing issues (2004–8)
	Space, science, technology and communication (1954–6)		Social welfare (1970–3)		Community development, planning and housing issues (1996–8)	
	Agriculture (1956–9)		Community development, planning and housing Issues (1970–3)			
			Energy (1976–8)			
			Community development, planning and housing issues (1976–8)			

mean, medium, maximum, minimum and standard deviations. There are then compared across different countries. As a measure of stability Sigelman and Buell's formula for divergence is not without problems; nevertheless it provides a starting point.

The measure of divergence (or instability) is the sum of the absolute differences between two agenda profiles with the resulting difference normalised between 0 and 100. Consider the hypothetical example in Table 4 where there are just three issues. In this case, the absolute differences between the two government speeches would sum to 10: $|40 - 45| + |20 - 20| + |40 - 35|$. Since both negative and positive differences are treated equally the highest sum is 200, with 0 being the lowest difference possible. Since a value of 0 represents perfect agenda stability and a value of 200 represents perfect agenda instability, the hypothetical appears to be a one of relatively strong agenda stability. (We say 'appears' because of course the numbers only make sense relatively – in comparison with other pairs.) Standardising this measure to range between 0 and 100 and subtracting from 100 to convert it into a measure of stability rather than instability, the agenda-stability measure is expressed as:

$$AS_t = 100 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} |GS_t - GS_{t-1}| \right) \Big/ 2$$

where GS_t and GS_{t-1} is the percentage of the total government speech devoted to a particular issue at time t and time $t - 1$, and the absolute differences between them are summed over all n of the potential issues on the agendas. Hence, if AS_t equals 100 the issue composition of the government agenda in year t is identical with the issue composition of the government agenda in year $t - 1$. On the other hand, if AS_t equals 0 the two successive government agendas have been focused on entirely different issues.

Figure 4 shows the agenda-stability measure for each GG speech (that is, how far it converges from the previous speech). It shows Australian politics oscillating between periods of agenda stability and instability. In chronological order, the moments where speeches are *most* similar in agenda coverage from

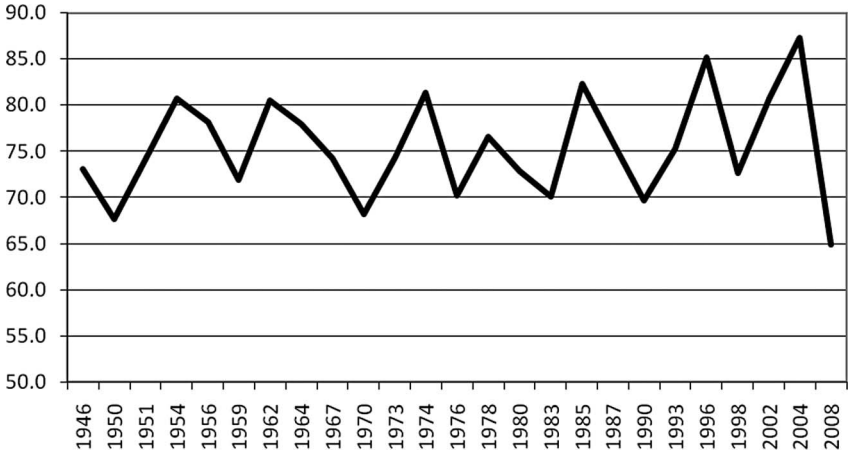

Figure 4. Australian Agenda Stability, 1945–2008.

Table 4. Hypothetical Example of Agenda Stability

	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3	Total
Government speech time 1	40%	20%	40%	100%
Government speech time 2	45%	20%	35%	100%

the previous speech occur in 1954 (stability score 80) 1962 (80), 1974 (81), 1985 (82), 1996 (85) and 2004 (87). All but one of these speeches follow the re-election of a government. The exception, of course, is Howard's 1996 speech. In *The March of Patriots*, Kelly (2009, 234–5) emphasises how Howard adopted a safety-first election strategy in 1996 which sought to exploit the unpopularity of Keating and the government without offering many specific policy commitments which Labor could attack (see also Adams 2000; Singleton 2000). Our findings support this argument. Upon entering office Howard emphasised the same broad policy issues as Keating had in 1993. This is not to say that the policy agenda was unchanged in 1996. Looking in more detail at the policy sub-category level, Howard devoted proportionately more attention to small business issues (up from 1% in 1993 to 4% in 1996) and productivity and competitiveness (2% to 4%) and proportionately less attention to industrial policy (down from 3% in 1993 to 0% in 1996), ethnic minority and racial group discrimination (1.5% to 0.8%), arts and humanities (2.7% to 1.6%) and government ethics and political advertising (3.6% to 0.8%). These differences are not unexpected: they broadly fit with our existing images of the policy interests of the two leaders. With the notable exception of industrial policy which disappeared from the agenda in 1996 and has not reappeared since (it consumed less than 1% of the speeches in 1998, 2002 and 2004 and was conspicuous by its absence in 2008) the differences are however a matter of degree. Small business and productivity received more attention in 1996 than they had in 1993 but these were not new issues.

The peak moments of divergence from the previous speech occur in Menzies' first speech in 1950 (stability score 67), Menzies' 1959 speech (72), Gorton's 1970 speech (68.2), Fraser's first speech in 1976 (70.2), Hawke's first speech in 1983 (70.1), Hawke's 1990 speech (69), Howard's 1998 speech (72.6), and Rudd's first speech in 2008 (64.9). These results are intriguing for a number of reasons. Firstly, this list does not include Whitlam's 1973 speech. Whitlam, of course, had delivered his famous radical 'It's Time' policy speech in November 1972 from the Blacktown Civic Centre in Sydney and, in the case of a number of specific policy issues, we have seen that his first GG speech marked a policy punctuation and a new direction in the overall policy agenda that has continued until this day. But whilst Whitlam dramatically raised the profile of some issues, he devoted almost exactly the same level of attention to other issues – health, education, the environment, transport and government operations – as his predecessor, Gorton, had done in 1970. Therefore, the finding that the overall agenda was relatively stable between 1970 and 1973 is consistent with our argument that there were a number of policy punctuations in 1973 and that Whitlam's election constituted an important turning-point in the post-war agenda. The finding here that Whitlam pushed a lot of issues on to the policy

agenda is not surprising (Emy, Hughes and Matthews 1993; Johnson 1989; Scotton and Ferber 1978; Teichman 1987). That his government permanently changed the nature of the agenda – at least as represented in GG speeches – is more so.

What are we finding here? We might compare this finding with analyses of the ideological convergence and divergence of the major Australian parties in the post-war period. This literature reports on the proportion of policy speeches devoted to different issues (as we do here) as well as coding for ideological position. Robertson (1987) studies the period 1946–80 and found the parties emphasised different issues in the immediate post war period, but ideologically were furthest apart in the early period 1946–51 and late period 1974–80 (largely as the Liberals had moved rightwards) and ideologically closest during the boom years in between. Budge and Klingemann (2001) tell a tale of trendless fluctuation over the period, but McAllister and Moore (1991) by contrast found that on economic policy the parties were further apart from 1972 to 1990 than at any time since 1946. However, on social policy the parties converged from 1972. What we are picking up on here is that the Whitlam government forced onto the agenda a new set of social issues over which the parties differed in detail, but for which, from that time, they needed to articulate a policy position. Whitlam's government stand outs ideologically in some regards, but its real significance is that it has set a 40-year policy agenda.[5]

Secondly, and having just argued that we might explain periods of agenda stability in terms of an incumbency effect, it is notable that significant agenda change occurred in 1959, 1970, 1990 and 1998 without a new party entering office. It may be that on these occasions the government was responding to external events. Alternatively, it may be that these governments gained the confidence over time to stake out an alternative policy agenda. Party change and actor preference accounts tend to regard the election of a new party to office as a decisive moment. On some occasions, however, it may be that whilst the election of a new party is significant, there is a 'delayed drop' effect. Governments inherit problems from their predecessors and the agenda they set at the beginning of their term is at least partly set by their opponents both through their actions in government and through the election campaign. The winning party must deal with those issues first (perhaps with radically new policies), and it is maybe not until their second term that they can start to change the nature of the policy agenda itself .

The third point of interest in this list is the presence of Rudd's 2008 speech. In his election-night victory speech Rudd promised to put 'aside the old battles of the past' between business and unions, growth and the environment and federal and state and forge a 'new consensus'. Such are of course the promises made on

[5]How different Whitlam's government was is not without controversy. Mackay (1993), Maddox (1989), Jaensch (1989), and Beilharz (1994) all see Whitlam's government standing out as different from later Labor governments who ideologically converged with Liberals, whilst Richardson (1994), Cairns (1976) from opposing factions in the Labor Party see Whitlam as starting that trend and Walter (1996) argues the 1975 budget started economic convergence. In all cases, we might see their views resting on economic rather than social policy; and in ideological rather than policy agenda terms. Goot (2004) argues convincingly that on all these issues whether or not the parties converge, and when they have converged ideologically depends to a great extent on the criteria adopted and the salience of the issues.

Table 5. Whitlam, Hawke and Rudd Compared

	1973 (relative to 1970)	1983 (relative to 1980)	2008 (relative to 2004)
Macroeconomics	−	−	−
Civil rights, minority issues and civil liberties	+	+	+
Health	−	+	+
Agriculture	−	+	+
Labour, employment and immigration	+	−	−
Education and culture	+	+	+
Environment	−	+	+
Energy	−	−	+
Transport	−	+	−
Law, crime and family	−	+	−
Social welfare	+	−	−
Community development, planning and housing	+	+	+
Banking, finance and domestic commerce	−	+	−
Defence	−	−	−
Space, science, technology and communications	−	+	−
Foreign trade	−	−	−
International affairs and foreign aid	+	−	−
Government operations	−	+	+
Public lands, water management, colonial and territorial issues	−	+	+

election nights. Yet it would appear that in his February 2008 GG speech Rudd did articulate a very different set of priorities from Howard's, even if, in many cases, Rudd is not pursuing radically different policies.

There is, in this respect, an interesting point of continuity between Whitlam, Hawke and Rudd. Table 5 shows whether in 1973, 1983 and 2008 the newly elected Labor governments increased (+) or decreased (−) the attention devoted to each of the 19 policy issues relative to the speeches of their Liberal predecessors (Gorton in 1970, Fraser in 1980 and Howard in 2004). It shows that there are seven issues where both Whitlam and Hawke either increased or decreased their attention and 12 issues where one either increased it and the other decreased it or vice-versa.[6]

But of the seven issues where the direction of change in 1973 and 1983 was the same, six also had the same direction of change in 2008. These are macroeconomics (reduced attention), civil rights (increased), education (increased), community development, planning and housing (increased), defence (reduced) and foreign trade (reduced). The only exception is energy, the salience of which decreased under Whitlam and Hawke but increased under

[6]Of course this is attention to an area, and not the nature of the policy within that area. The Hawke government with Keating as Treasurer sought to distance themselves from Whitlam's economic policy and embrace financial deregulation, but the amount attention devoted to the area is similar.

Rudd. Judging by the contents of his first GG speech, it would appear that Rudd, as a Labor leader, has sought to change the policy agenda in the same directions as Whitlam and Hawke but moved it to a greater extent in his first speech than either did in theirs.

How Fragmented Is the Policy Agenda?

The fragmentation of any speech is rather different from its divergence from the previous speech. A GG speech might diverge greatly from the previous one but it might do so either by changing how much space is devoted to each issue without raising new issues or by raising a whole new set of issues. How many issues are covered in a speech is its degree of fragmentation. The degree of fragmentation measures whether governments at certain times are preoccupied with one or two big issues, such as the economy and international affairs, or whether they are paying an equal amount of attention to a larger number of issues.

Of course whilst a GG speech might allude to a large number of issues, the Prime Minister and their team might actually concentrate their attention upon just one or two topics. Nevertheless, as a signal for what the government intends to do, the GG speech provides information about the concentration of the government on the set of issues mentioned. In communication theory signals are thought to provide varying degrees of information and average information per message is defined as entropy, of which the standard measure is Shannon's H (Shannon 1948). A GG speech that concentrates upon one or two issues signals that a government's attention is focussed on those particular issues. If it ranges over a variety of issues the information it contains is lower. We can measure this using Shannon's H. Applied to our case it measures the probability of a government concentrating attention upon the issues contained within the GG speech. If one topic is covered then the probability that the government will concentrate attention upon that is assumed to be 1. If there were 20 topics and then the unconditional probability that the government will concentrate upon any one of them is 0.05, or conversely if its attention is equally spread across all then 5% of its attention would be devoted to each topic. Shannon's H takes the probabilistic interpretation and assumes the entropy of a system is measured by the spread of observations across a number of discrete nominal categories – agenda items in our case. The greater the entropy the greater the uncertainty about what the government will actually attend to. Entropy is measured by

$$H = (-1)\sum_{i=1}^{n} p(x_i)\ln(p(x_i))$$

where entropy scores (H) are estimated as the negative sum for all topics of the likelihood, p(x), that an object x (in this instance a policy statement in the GG's speech) falls within a particular topic i, multiplied by the natural log of that likelihood. Logs of zero cannot be calculated, so it is assumed that $0 \times \ln(0) = 0$ for topics where there were no policy statements in a given year. The maximum possible entropy score for the 19 major topic codes is equal to the natural log of 19 (i.e. 2.944). An entropy score of 0 indicates that attention is concentrated in a

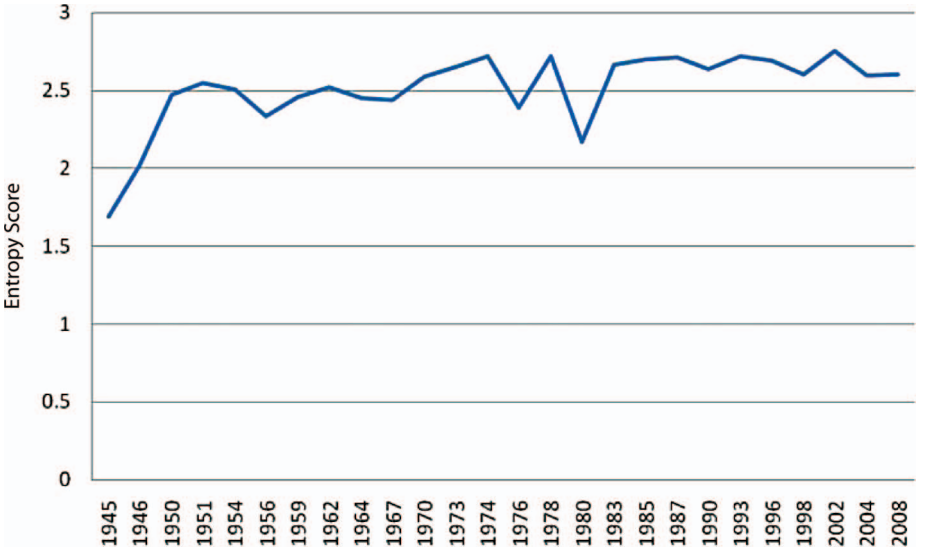

Figure 5. Entropy Scores for Governor-General Speeches, 1945–2008.

single topic, while a score of 2.944 indicates that attention is equally spread across all 19 major topics such that each issue is assumed to receive 5.26 % of the attention (or strictly speaking has a 5.26% probability of being the item on which the government concentrates at any one time).

Figure 5 shows that in 1945 the executive's attention was concentrated upon a small number of issues (unsurprisingly, international affairs and defence) but that the policy agenda then fragmented. Since the early 1950s there have been no great changes in the degree of concentration of the agenda. The only partial exceptions are 1976 (2.3) and 1980 (2.1) when the policy agenda focused upon macroeconomic issues.

Conclusions

In this paper we have analysed changes in the content of the Governor-General's speech between 1945 and 2008. We see this speech as a signal of an incoming government's policy intent. We recognise that as such it is a noisy and potentially biased signal as the GG can be used for political purposes by the Prime Minister of the day. In analysing the GG speech we emulated other studies of head-of-state executive speeches also employing the policy agenda method, but also focused on the particular attributes of the Australian speech, that, at least in recent decades, it occurs at the start of a session rather than annually. This raises the issue of setting the agenda for the whole parliament, rather than incremental changes each year, and as such actual policy agendas might depart from that set in the GG speech more radically than annual speeches as events intrude. Our analysis in terms of policy agendas as such is thus preliminary and is a first step in a much broader analysis of the policy agenda of Australian Commonwealth governments. Further analysis will

embrace coding legislation to give a proper picture of government attention; media analysis to gauge how the media and public see the agenda; and parliamentary questions to see how far the opposition can affect agendas. We will try also to examine expenditures though official statistics are problematic in that regard: more so than when Scotton and Ferber (1978; 1980) attempted such analysis (though in a less general manner than the policy agenda approach).

Our main findings are that:

(1) there has been a secular increase in the attention accorded to macroeconomic, labour, employment and immigration issues and health, education and social welfare issues;
(2) a secular decrease in the attention accorded to agriculture, international affairs and defence;
(3) that the 'turning-points' in a number of these cases came with the election of the Whitlam government;
(4) that policy change is characterised both by incremental changes in the attention accorded to issues *and* punctuations as attention suddenly increases and then falls away;
(5) that the punctuations in the post-war executive agenda include civil rights in the 1970s, and the environment in the late 1980s;
(6) that a disproportionate number of these punctuations occurred following the election of the Whitlam government;
(7) that, nevertheless, the moments of the greatest divergence from the previous GG speech occurred not in 1973 but in 1950, 1959, 1970, 1976, 1983, 1990, 1998 and 2008;
(8) that, since the 1950s, the level of fragmentation of the agenda has not significantly changed.

We must be careful in interpreting these findings. First, our focus has been upon changes in the policy agenda of incoming governments rather than in actual policy outcomes or in policy instruments. Second, executive speeches do not represent the sum of the executive agenda. Neither does the executive agenda constitute the entire policy agenda. Third, we have not attempted to explain changes in the content of the agenda. Attention to a particular issue is one thing; the nature of that attention is another. Furthermore, we have not attempted to provide a full causal explanation of changes in attention. That would require much more detailed analysis of specific cases involving detailed qualitative scrutiny. Rather our exercise is more descriptive, providing, for the first time, a map of the changing policy agenda. Explaining changes in the policy agenda would require another and more extensive enterprise. Nevertheless, the Policy Agenda method makes possible the detailed comparison of longitudinal data on the contents of the policy agenda. This data is valuable both where it is consistent with but provides tangible evidence for what are intuitively obvious findings – that the attention paid to macroeconomic issues increased during the economically troubled 1970s; and where it generates counter-intuitive results – that Whitlam's election did not constitute a moment of peak agenda instability even though it resulted in a number of policy punctuations and turning-points. Whitlam did provide a radical (and

permanent) break from the past, but he also continued to devote considerable attention to the same kind of issues that had preoccupied his Liberal predecessors.

Of course, these suggestions and our general findings need to be backed and compared with other historical case-studies. They also underline the need for a larger study – of which this paper is the preliminary part – of the executive agenda. They do, however, indicate some of the trends and changes in Australian politics as its leaders deal with demands to address topics such as health, the economy, education, immigration, which compete for attention. Just as in other countries there are tendencies for the agenda to be stable for significant periods of time followed by rapid changes. In this respect, policy agendas in Australia resemble those in other democracies, but the particular form taken in Australia – the rate of change, the degree of punctuations, the tendency to diversity – derives from the specific character of its political institutions and form of party competition and is unique. In this way, the insights from the policy agendas approach both complement and extend existing knowledge about Australian politics.

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