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Home-grown heroes: the use of narrative in Prime Minister Julia Gillard's 2011 'Motion of condolence: natural disasters'

Abstract:

In late 2010 and early 2011, a spate of natural disasters wreaked havoc across Australia. Several states and communities within them suffered the catastrophic effects of fire, cyclone or flood. On 8 February 2011, Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivered a motion of condolence to the House of Representatives, Canberra. The motion of condolence paid respect to those who had died as a result of the disasters and expressed sympathy to their families. It also acknowledged the extent of the devastation and the profound effects on families, communities and the nation; praised the extraordinary efforts made by Australians to respond to the needs of those affected by the disasters; and promised ongoing support from the government.

The motion of condolence is a formal, rhetorical response to a death or deaths of national significance, and as such it fits within the epideictic genre of rhetoric, which is associated with praise and the expression of communal values. By its very nature, the motion of condolence provides a rare and formal opportunity for a national leader to articulate the fundamental principles upon which the nation is founded and the core characteristics of the citizenry. Because of that, the motion of condolence potentially represents a potent and unique response to place, in terms of the ways in which place has shaped, and will continue to shape, those who must cope with the challenges it presents.

This paper analyses Gillard's motion of condolence from this perspective. The analysis pays particular attention to the role of narrative, including the ways in which narrative is used by Gillard to illustrate, repeatedly and consistently, the characteristics of a people whose actions, and as a consequence character, are determined by the extraordinary demands placed upon them by the place in which they live. In doing so, the analysis draws on narrative theory, notably the principles of narrative coherence and fidelity espoused by rhetorical theorist Walter Fisher. By identifying the features of narratives dominant in the motion of condolence, including narratives of heroism, the paper reaches conclusions about the nature of the 'Australian' who is central to the motion of condolence.

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Introduction

Calamity provides a good if unwelcome opportunity for the articulation of national values through story. For Australians, this is well illustrated by the annual remembering and retelling of the landing of Australian soldiers at Gallipoli, Turkey, during World War I, which translates the dismal tale of a failed military operation into an inspirational legend that foregrounds tenacity, sacrifice and mateship. Critical to this process are formal, ceremonial events that serve to reinforce communal adherence to those values.

Such events, and what is enacted through them, constitute a genre of rhetoric identified by Aristotle in 400 BCE and of continuing relevance to scholarship on the persuasive dimensions of public discourse. Aristotle identified display or ceremonial – epideictic – rhetoric as being concerned with praise or denigration and the present, ‘... (for it is on the basis of how things are that all [people] accord praise or blame), though they also often make additional use of historical recollection or anticipatory conjecture’ (1991, 80). Epideictic rhetoric has more recently been theorised as a form of persuasion premised upon communal values and identification:

... the argumentation in epid[e]ictic discourse sets out to increase the intensity of adherence to certain values, which might not be contested when considered on their own but may nevertheless not prevail against other values that might come into conflict with them. The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement. (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 51)

The ‘whole range of means available to the rhetorician’ may be material as well as linguistic. Linguistic representations of communal values include narrative, which is an especially potent technique for the translation of calamitous events into expressions of communal solidarity. This paper examines one such use of narrative.

The ‘Motion of condolence’ and narrative

In late 2010 and early 2011, a spate of natural disasters wreaked havoc across Australia. Several states and communities within them suffered the catastrophic effects of fire, cyclone or flood. On 8 February 2011, Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivered a motion of condolence to the House of Representatives, Canberra.¹ At 2508 words, it was delivered in just under 18 minutes. The ‘Motion of condolence’ paid respect to those who had died as a result of the natural disasters and expressed sympathy to their families. It also acknowledged the extent of the devastation and the profound effects on families, communities and the nation; praised the extraordinary efforts made by Australians to respond to the needs of those affected by the disasters; promised ongoing support from the government; and acknowledged international support.

Related to the eulogy, the motion of condolence is a ceremonial acknowledgment of a death or deaths of national significance. By its very nature, the motion of condolence provides a rare and formal opportunity for a national leader to articulate the

fundamental principles upon which the nation is founded and the core characteristics of the citizenry. Because of that, the motion of condolence delivered to honour those who have died in natural disasters potentially represents a potent and unique response to place, in terms of the ways in which place has shaped, and will continue to shape, those who must cope with the challenges it presents.

For the orator, place in this sense becomes a rhetorical construct that serves to not only influence what is said in honour of the dead but also what is said to define and unite the people. This is so for the 2011 'Motion of condolence' on natural disasters. Through mention of named regions and communities, Gillard alludes to the diversity of the continent and its people, but the Australia that emerges from her speech is one that is essentially uniform. Its natural environment is consistently hostile; its people are consistently resilient.

It is through narrative that Gillard largely defines the qualities of Australians in relation to their country. She quickly positions the events of 2010–11 within a larger narrative of 'the journey' – death, recovery and rebuilding – generated by a hostile natural environment. After stating the motion before the House, she notes that the day before had seen commemoration of the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009, in which 173 people had died, a commemoration involving communities remembering not only those who had died but also 'the journey of rebuilding since' (para 3). She then moves from past to present, with 'words of condolence to Australians who are now facing this hard journey and to assure them they won't travel that hard journey alone', pledging that 'we won't let go' (para 5). This narrative arc of the journey is revisited at the conclusion of the speech – 'as we grieve, as we recover, as we rebuild' – where Gillard reiterates that 'we will hold on to each other' (para 90).

Gillard elsewhere demonstrates sensitivity to being in the midst of an unfolding historical narrative to which the natural environment is central. That narrative is of two types. One is generated by the natural environment itself and is beyond human control; the other is prompted by the natural environment but is essentially humanistic. Gillard refers to each explicitly. Early on, she uses anaphora to convey the enormity of the devastation that faced Australians and would be etched into the collective consciousness, in four sentences beginning with 'this summer will always be remembered for ...' (paras 6–10). Following the third of these sentences is this: 'Australia has watched in horror as day after day a new chapter in natural disaster history has been written' (para 9). Later, Gillard says this:

But I urge that this summer when we write its history we should make sure that the history written into the books and into our hearts is more than the history of a time of loss and grief.

We should also remember this summer as a summer of courage. (paras 26–27)

Writing that history at a collective and national level begins, officially, with the 'Motion of condolence'.

In beginning to shape that history as 'more than the history of a time of loss and grief', Gillard predictably praises the courageousness of Australians. One part of the motion is that the House 'records its admiration for the courage shown by so many in

the face of these disasters' (para 1). Courage is next explicitly mentioned in paragraph 27, with the phrase 'summer of courage', after which proof of that courage is delivered through stories. The first of these is made symbolically representative of the people through Gillard's display of 'a mud splattered, tattered Australian flag' (para 28). The flag, she explains, was presented to her by a helicopter crew who with others had worked 'through a dark and dangerous night, when waters crashed through the Lockyer Valley, to literally save dozens and dozens of lives' (para 29). She describes the flag, again using anaphora, as 'a powerful symbol':

Of what it means to face the elements

Of what it means to be hurt

Of what it means to endure

Of what it means to be Australian. (para 33)

Other stories follow. Some are representative of the people – 'The courage it takes to keep filling sandbags even when your back is breaking' (para 35) – and others tell of exceptional acts of courage, as with one that is elevated to 'legend':

The courage it takes for a young boy, 13 year old Jordan Rice, to say to his rescuer, take my brother first.

And before that brave rescuer could return, Jordan and mum Donna, were taken by the flood; but the legend of Jordan's amazing courage will go on. (paras 38–39)

This segues into the first use of the word 'hero' – Jordan Rice is 'A hero in the purest sense of the word' (para 40) – after which Gillard acknowledges 'other heroes' (paras 41, 48).

Cumulatively and narratively, Gillard crafts an ideal of civic behaviour familiar to Australians, whether through the iconic Anzac legend or populist notions of the 'Aussie battler', that involves facing adversity (in this case, 'the elements'), suffering and enduring. Discernable here is epideictic rhetoric as a form of 'argumentation' that 'sets out to increase the intensity of adherence to certain values' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 51), and the audience is left in no doubt as to what those values are. In all, 'courage' is cited 16 times by Gillard from paragraphs 27 to 56. 'Mateship', which in Australia is the corollary to courage, is then mentioned four times (paras 57–60) to define Australians' response to the summer of 2010–11. Gillard has 'been so touched by the stories of bravery, of courage and of mateship that [she] felt an obligation to honour these wonderful Australian traits' (para 58). The use of 'traits' here is suggestive of behaviours inherent rather than acquired, an idea later expressed more fully:

We should be so proud, so proud that there is something uniquely Australian about the way we go about helping our mates.

It's understated.

It's done with humour and humility.

And it signifies a strength of character that is etched deeply within our nation's DNA. (paras 79–82)

Following this reflection on the nature of the Australian character, Gillard in the closing part of her speech moves, with an echo of Winston Churchill, to the future: ‘Character that has ensured that our darkest hours are always followed by our finest hour as we work together to help each other, to not let go, to begin the healing’ (para 83). Australians will, she says, band together, support those who have suffered and each other, and ‘will always remember the days of despair and the days of courage we’ve lived through together this summer’ (para 91). So ends the ‘Motion of condolence’ before its formal adoption by the House.

Superficially, Gillard’s use of narrative can be seen as simplistic and predictable, based as it is on the repetition of familiar tropes, but such repetition is at the heart of epideictic rhetoric as a genre, and the use of narrative to persuasive ends within the genre. Vivian draws attention to the reliance of ceremonial rhetoric since antiquity on ‘catechistically instructing audiences’ (2006, 5), including across generations, in order to maintain collective memory (2006, 5–6). The work of theorist Walter Fisher serves to foreground the particular role of narrative in this sense. According to Fisher’s narrative paradigm, as theorised in *Human communication as narration*, all human communication is based on narrative, and people are persuaded when narrative is coherent and believable:

We naturally and without formal instruction ask about any account ... whether or not it ‘holds together’ and adds up to a reliable claim to reality. We ask whether or not an account is faithful to related accounts we already know and believe. On these terms we *identify* with an account (and its author) or we treat it as mistaken. We identify with stories or accounts when we find that they offer ‘good reasons’ for being accepted ... (1987, 194)

Audience judgment of story, then, is a rational process based on principles of coherence and fidelity, to use Fisher’s terminology. Ceremony, especially when officially sanctioned at national level, is a performative occasion for presenting to the citizenry, through story, ‘a reliable claim to reality’.

For Australians, beyond doubt is the authenticity of stories told by Gillard about individual experiences of the natural disasters of 2010–11. They had been confirmed by extensive media coverage and are consistent with iconic tales of endurance, including those told of past natural disasters. They serve also to illustrate the ‘Aussie spirit’ so prominent in populist appeals to ‘Australianness’. The Aussie spirit that emerges from these stories is, however, less robust than might be expected. Notable in the ‘Motion of condolence’ are admissions that what has been lost can never be replaced; what has been hurt can never be healed: ‘Their deaths have left people behind who now live with an empty, gaping chasm and no insurance payout is going to fill that, no financial assistance payment is going to fill it, no rebuilt house will fill it’ (para 21). Even the stories of heroism do not always shine:

And there are other heroes ... like Mark Kempton ...

They should be patting themselves on the back and saying job well done to each other.

Instead, Mark is haunted, he’s haunted [by] every human face of this disaster, a

woman he rescued who wept uncontrollably as she was pulled into the helicopter ...

How do you tell Mark to rejoice in thinking of the people he saved when that young mother can think of nothing except the child she lost? (paras 41–47)

Even though the ‘heroes’ are consoled that, because of their efforts, ‘there are hundreds, even thousands of people who are *not* grieving today’ (para 48), Gillard continues to acknowledge irreparable harm. Later, she says:

We will not succumb to the misguided notion that once the floodwaters recede, once the debris strewn by the cyclone is removed and the camera crews pack up and the focus of the nation turns to something else, that life somehow magically returns to normal for those who have suffered at the hands of natural disasters.

It does not. (paras 64–65)

Consistent with the pragmatism of this statement, Gillard then refers to practical measures to be taken to aid the recovery, including cooperation with state governments and the provision of services, and she acknowledges international support before citing the ‘strength of character that is etched deeply within our nation’s DNA’ (para 82) and will ensure survival. Even that, however, is soon dampened by an expression of vulnerability, through reference to ‘the victims of the catastrophes’ and what has been lost and cannot be replaced. Platitudes about the loss of material objects are notably absent here; rather, loss is expressed in the form of a list that alternates between objects (‘the precious things’) and ‘the lives’ (para 85), with no qualitative differentiation between them. The ending, which as already noted concerns the future, is overall an uplifting one, but it is only reached after the crafting of the tough Aussie spirit has been tempered by admissions of vulnerability. What is occurring here, in terms of epideictic function, is worth a closer look.

Epideictic inflections

Epideictic rhetoric tends to have ‘a conservative style that draws on customary symbols, topics, and rituals’ (Richards 2009, 7). As Vivian (2006, 5) puts it, ‘epideictic forms, particularly the public funeral oration, are not principally artistic endeavours but civic institutions – *institutions of speech*’, and they are ‘typically didactic’ in their perpetuation of ideal civic beliefs and values in the collective memory. Generically, the motion of condolence, delivered formally as it is to the Australian parliament, represents oratory as a civic institution. That delivered by Gillard in 2011 is conservative both linguistically, in its representation of the archetypical Aussie spirit through tales of heroism and tenacity, and materially, in its use of the battered Australian flag. It also, however, represents a singular type of epideictic rhetoric in terms of both purpose and content. To illustrate, it is instructive to consider what epideictic rhetoric can be, and what Gillard’s ‘Motion of condolence’ is not.

While ceremonial occasions around death, and what is said at them, are typically ritualised around the praise of people and deeds, they also present opportunities for national leaders to advance political agenda. This is especially so when death is

attributable to national policy. Here, the orator may translate preventable death into heroic sacrifice associated with a higher cause. In 1986, for example, US President Ronald Reagan's tribute to the seven astronauts who died in the Challenger space shuttle disaster contained a reaffirmation of the US space program and an implicit assertion of US superiority over Cold War foes. Another political opportunity arises when the orator uses commemoration of past conflict to justify present policy, as did George W Bush in 2005 when through a speech to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the World War II allied victory over Japan, he promoted the war with Iraq (Bostdorff 2011).

The orator who tinges epideictic rhetoric politically risks misjudging audience and occasion, and the community and values represented by them. The result can be rhetoric 'gone wrong'. Illustrative is Agnew's (2008) analysis of the delivery of a commencement address at Rockford College in the US in 2003, which caused a violent reaction among audience members who objected to the speaker delivering an anti-Iraq war message rather than the inspirational 'climb every mountain' speech typical at such events. Also illustrative is Vivian's (2006) analysis of objections to what was perceived as a lack of linguistic originality in the commemoration of events marking the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in the US. In both cases, audience expectations around genre were upset, which while not necessary unproductive serves to confirm that connection between orator and audience is central to epideictic rhetoric.

Behind these examples of politically inflected or controversial epideictic rhetoric are stories based on human agency (variously manifest by nations choosing to fight or space shuttles happening to explode) that causes suffering, both individually and collectively. By careful fashioning of these stories, an orator can justify ideologies and actions surrounding untimely death. Such narrative crafting may be critical for the political leader as orator; should it not occur, stories may, from a rhetorical perspective and in Fisher's terms, lack the coherence and fidelity upon which persuasive narrative depends. Put simply, stories will leave audiences incredulous and alienated. Behind Gillard's 'Motion of condolence', on the other hand, is death caused by the immutable qualities of place – the 'terrifying power of nature' (para 46) – rather than the transmutable qualities of human beings. Narrative coherence and fidelity, based as they are upon the forces of nature and the susceptibility of people to harm from them, are already established at a fundamental level.

This is not to say that epideictic rhetoric in response to deaths from natural disasters is always a 'pure' form of honouring the dead that cannot have political dimensions. For the political leader as orator, however, natural disasters present a singular opportunity to not only reinforce the attributes of a people, and their relation to place, but also by extension to acknowledge a type of vulnerability that under other circumstances would be left unsaid. A discourse of vulnerability has been identified as a distinctive rhetorical turn in public responses to disaster in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, specifically those responses in Britain to flooding (Furedi 2007b) and outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (Furedi 2007a). It is also evident in Gillard's 'Motion of condolence'. To momentarily move beyond the speech in its written form, Gillard's delivery of it intensified the message

of vulnerability. As reported by the ABC, ‘the Prime Minister couldn’t hide her emotion’ and was ‘[f]ighting back tears’ in a ‘heartfelt’ speech that lacked the ‘woodenness’ that her detractors had recently criticised (Hawley 2011, para 8).

Concluding comment

As well as reinforcing communal values, epideictic rhetoric can also ‘promote alternative public norms, identities, and practices’ (Richards 2009, 2). Australians are familiar with ‘the terrifying power of nature’ (Gillard 2011, para 46), accustomed as they are to bushfire, cyclone, flood and drought. They are also accustomed to the invocation of the Aussie spirit through tales of hardship, heroism and mateship. The 2011 ‘Motion of condolence’ on natural disasters, however, contains and concludes with an admission of vulnerability caused by irreparable harm having been done, along with reassurance of communal support and emotional sensitivity, through reference to ‘the warm embrace of the Australian community’ (para 89). A question arises here of whether such an expression of vulnerability and emotional sensitivity is present more widely in Australian ceremonial rhetoric in response to natural disasters and, as such, represents a normative inflection of the Aussie spirit that is inextricably linked to place, as constructed rhetorically by political leaders. This question is particularly apt at a time when reports of climate change challenge collective understanding of place and human relations to it, and while beyond the scope of this paper is the subject of ongoing research by the author.

Endnote

1. The speech is referred to as ‘Motion of condolence’ from here, with excerpts identified by parenthetical paragraph numbers only.

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