

Language matters

Setting agendas - taking charge of the language

What this paper is about

This paper is about Labour taking greater charge of the language of debate and discussion in New Zealand. It is called *re-framing* and it means gaining (or regaining) the use of concepts and phrases that spark public and media interest.

To do that requires a closer examination of key Labour values and finding words to describe those values that resonate with voters; especially Labour/ or potential Labour voters.

The political right often does this much better than the left, not just in NZ but in many other countries. The right do it better because they understand the importance of capturing the language; they invest more money in it; and they tend to more arrogantly assert that their ideas are the right ones.

This paper provides some ideas for how to go about a *reframing* process. It's a starting point.

Why this paper

The ways in which public debate and discussion occur in New Zealand can be very frustrating. Issues come and go - seemingly at the whim of a fickle media, often dependent on who crows the loudest and is the most controversial at the time.

Important policy discussion and debate about future direction occurs in an ad hoc and infrequent manner in the public arena, and when it does, it is fractured and often incoherent, unconnected to other big ticket issues or to a framework of ideas and values.

Despite being in power for more than six years, Labour's framework is not clearly understood by a confused and sometimes unhappy electorate.

In the 2005 election, Labour's main opponent National was very close to victory and by many accounts could/should have won. The vast majority of public attention during the 2005 election focussed on National's agenda, NOT Labour's. Its message and framework was more coherent and struck a chord with those in the electorate who had become disenchanted with Labour. Why National failed can be endlessly debated but the signals are that (unless National implodes) Labour needs to set a much clearer agenda to win next time.

The big risks and challenges for Labour are the length of time it's been in power; whether it can instil new blood and demonstrate new ideas; its ability to clearly articulate vision and ideas without being labelled arrogant and PC; the status of the economy and how that is linked to Labour's governing.

A way to approach these risks is to reframe public discourse about the things that matter to New Zealanders and to ensure Labour is identified with those core values.

Easier said than done. For although a lot of work has already been done on this, it clearly hasn't been effective enough because the vast majority of New Zealanders don't really "get it". And until they do; until

the mere mention of an issue or a phrase by a Labour politician can evoke instant understanding and support among a substantial proportion of the population, then not only is the next election outcome in doubt, but the hearts and minds of many New Zealanders could be beyond Labour's grasp, possibly for many years.

This paper attempts to set out a way forward to formulate a new approach to public discourse.

It's about all Labour Party members understanding how to *frame* a discussion and debate and how to *take charge* of the language we use. It requires courage by Labour to acknowledge its difficulty in pushing public debate and to impact on New Zealanders' values. It requires Labour being "unapologetic and unafraid" (without being arrogant) to put forward its view of the world with "dignity and strength". We need to stand up for our values, but firstly we need to clarify what they are.

In this paper I draw on 17 years of my own research and work as a strategic communications consultant working in both Australia and New Zealand; and from the writings of US linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff; the US think tank The Rockridge Institute and The Center for American Progress.

What's missing?

Why is language so important?

If you control the language, you control the message. The media doesn't create the message, they run with it. So who defines what we discuss in the public arena? Who decides the terms in which we will discuss issues and who coins the key phrases which determine how key issues are framed for public consumption?

Labour doesn't do it enough. And yet Labour has been the government for more than six years! How can this be?

Firstly, all governments (whatever side of politics they are on) are under constant attack by their oppositions and New Zealand is no different to the UK, Australia and the US in having an opposition that vigorously jumps on bandwagons; points out all failings and often makes up failings of the ruling party. We have a media that generally touches on issues of import only superficially; that loves a good stoush; that tends to "attack" rather than consider the merits of an issue.

Secondly, Labour, like all socially progressive parties around the world, doesn't tend to invest in its own survival. It seldom establishes arm's length organisations to generate researched policy positions or to craft messages and values based positions. It tends to rely on the goodwill and commitment of fellow travellers to stand up for Labour values and argue Labourist positions. It also tends to rely on the facts of the matter to speak for themselves.

National, representing the conservative side of politics, and like all conservative parties, tends to have big business backing. This represents big \$\$, often invested in think-tank like organisations which in countries like the US, Australia (and the UK?) pump out conservative policy and positions and craft values-based messages that resonate with core sections of the populace. This happens (to some extent) in New Zealand most notably through the Maxim Institute.

George Lakoff argues that the right's highest value is preserving itself and the right makes huge investments in doing just that - through foundations and think tanks etc...

He asks what is the left's highest value? Well it's not about self preservation; it's more about helping others to have better lives, and the value of self preservation is somewhat buried and misunderstood. You can argue that helping others to live better lives is a much more worthy highest value than self preservation; but isn't self preservation pretty important too and shouldn't it be a bit higher on the list?

Ultimately, it all boils down to who is better at setting the agendas and running public discussion and debate on their terms. Lakoff calls it *framing* - "when we use our words and our phrases, people will instantly understand and have a mental picture of what we mean."

Setting out the facts isn't enough. Any discussion has to connect with the values of the people you are talking to and trying to convince. It is the language used and the "frame" that invokes those values.

What tends to happen in New Zealand (and elsewhere) is that the language used is often the terms/phrases coined by the opposition to downplay and undermine the Labour position. This results in Labour playing on the opposition's ground; on their terms.

Some examples of this include:

The Phrase	The frame (according to National)
Tax cuts Tax relief	After six years of Govt, LABOUR is taking all the benefits. Tax cuts would provide a sharing of the fiscal surpluses amongst people who deserve more money in their pockets - it's your money! Tax cuts are GOOD Labour's tax policies are BAD
Welfare dependency	Traditional kiwi values are being destroyed by a government funded culture of welfare dependency Working for Families = middle class welfare dependency Labour's policies create dependency = BAD
Parental choice	Where parents are able to make their own sensible decisions about how to raise children and organise their working and home lives WITHOUT intervention or involvement by the Labour Government
Racial separatism One law for all	Two sets of laws and 2 standards of citizenship. Labour has allowed a dangerous drift to racial separatism = BAD
Family values	Trusting people to make good decisions for themselves (by implication this is what the Labour Government DOESN'T DO = BAD)
Treaty grievance industry	Treaty of Waitangi settlements process taking too long, giving too much credence to Māori claims and

	cultivating a culture of racial separatism = BAD
Nanny state	Poor incentives and dependency, too much government intervention in our lives; government telling us what to do = BAD
Social engineering	Too much government intervention in our lives; against "traditional family values" = BAD

By even mentioning these terms/phrases, even in the context of criticism, a framework is evoked, created by the opposition, leaving an ongoing imprint in the audience's mind. It's a trap set by conservatives, whether they know it or not, to get Labour talking about their issues in conservative terms. And it works.

The best example of this is how the conservatives have established the term "PC" (otherwise known as "political correctness" or "Political Correctness gone mad") to represent anything put forward by Labour and other social progressives. This phrase has largely taken hold in our society (and other democratic societies). Because it is an all-encompassing phrase that is hard to define and pin down it is therefore extremely hard to argue against. The conservatives have control of the language and attempts to counter the accusation come across as defensive and self-defeating.

PC can mean anything really: whether it's about banning smoking in hotels, introducing civil union laws, smacking children, Māori protocol, male seating on planes, the right to privacy, using words that include both genders (chairperson, fisher), protecting our natural environment, small business compliance, occupational safety and health laws... the list goes on.

Another technique used by conservatives to good effect is to take the language of the social progressives and use it to mask their own intentions. This is becoming increasingly obvious around environment debates where the coal industry becomes *clean* and *safe*; and the recent re-introduction of the nuclear energy issue which is also *safe*, *clean* and *efficient*. Another example is Australian Prime Minister John Howard's use of "*work choices*" and the establishment of the *Fair Pay* Commission to mask draconian changes to workplace laws which impact adversely on ordinary working people and are ultimately designed to weaken the power of unions.

Another example is the conservative Fox TV Channel in America that uses a "*Fair and Balanced*" slogan when it is anything but.

Also, watch this space around climate change. This debate is "heating up" around the world. At stake is the right of big business to control the way it does business. In Australia and the US the debate is raging around alternatives to the Kyoto Protocol which involve "clean development of industry" (code for development on business's terms). In early May, in NZ, a coalition of scientists formed a new lobby group aimed at easing the public's fears about a climate change apocalypse. Called the New Zealand Climate Science Coalition, they are committed to providing New Zealanders with balanced scientific opinions that "reflect the truth about climate change and expose the exaggerated claims that have been made about human-caused global warming." (In other words - code for vested interests that don't want to change).

Lakoff says that when the conservatives start using your language it shows weakness and is an opportunity to expose them. He uses the term "Orwellian language" - which is where the phrase actually *means* the

opposite of what it *says*. However, he cautions the exposure must be done carefully, invoking the framework of the social progressive agenda to give it credence.

This is our gap. Labour often falls down in that it doesn't argue forcefully enough, with language which succinctly sums up Labour ideas and contrasts them with the conservative view. There are people who do this very well and are blessed with what is called "the gift of the gab" or the ability to humanise language and use real people examples in ways that their audience understands and respond positively to.

In NZ, there are some very good spokespeople on all sides of politics who can clearly articulate messages and "frame" a debate. However most of us, including some politicians, don't possess these natural talents, and when under pressure often resort to repeating meaningless messages that aren't rooted in an easily understandable key value (or representation of a failing) eg "*hip hop tours*" = government waste.

You can't have language without ideas and you can't have ideas without values

Setting agendas requires courage and conviction. This requires more confidence that Labour ideas are the ones that should shape the nation's future. One of Labour's key goals should be to define public debate in *our* terms.

To create language that invokes a *frame*, you must have the frame worked out. This requires understanding Labour values and being able to clearly articulate a Labour vision with guiding principles and policy positions. Labour has done a lot of this work (particularly around its policy positions) but how well is it linked to a values base and to a set of understandable guiding principles? The test is whether ordinary people "get it". I would argue they don't always "get it" which is why it was so hard for many voters to make the decision to vote Labour at the last election.

What's our metaphor for the nation?

We need a metaphor for the nation. In America, the metaphor is the "family" and Lakoff argues that that the conservatives espouse a "strict father" model of the family while the social progressives espouse a "nurturing parent" model.

The family metaphor is perhaps not quite right for New Zealand. But what is right? And why don't we have a metaphor?

We need to be able to explain the moral and value system of New Zealand social progressive in our terms. The political programme should be based on those values.

For example, when I try to understand what I mean by this, in terms that make sense to me, I have a metaphor goes something like this:

What I want for my children is essentially what I want for my country

Speaking as a mother of small children

I want them to:

- learn empathy; understand & identify with other people's feelings; & care about those feelings
- be able to share and not to be too possessive
- learn responsibility for themselves and for people around them (eg younger siblings)
- be courteous and polite and sensitive to others
- listen to what others have to say and make an attempt to understand other points of view
- be fair and to speak out when they see unfairness occur
- try the best they can and to make the most of opportunities
- do what's best for them and for the planet
- protect others who are vulnerable and to stand up against injustice
- be honest (tell the truth)
- be able to laugh at themselves and have a keen sense of humour
- think before they speak and act (about the consequences)
- believe in themselves and take some risks
- be competent and able to be well-rounded individuals
- have a strong sense of community and of their place in the community/family/whanau
- be able to co-operate and to initiate
- learn commitment to a cause; an issue; a pathway; and
- I want to trust them and for them to learn to trust others

The list of a 20 year old; a retired person; someone with a disability; or someone with a different cultural background might differ in some ways, but would probably also be very similar.

From these values stem ideas and arguments that reflect the aspirations of our times. From these ideas and arguments stem policy. But underpinning all - is the way we *speak* about our values; how we *describe* them; how we *communicate* .

Values, ideas.... then language

Lakoff says that *ideas* come before *language* . You have to explain the idea (and the values that underpin it) before you can expect the phrase (or the policy) to catch on.

Take tax as an example. When we talk about tax what is the framework that most people draw upon? Let's look at two frameworks:

1. Where tax is something we pay too much of, especially in times of economic prosperity. Instead of paying tax to promote "big government" we should pay less tax and share the benefits among the people who made the economic prosperity happen.
2. Where tax is an investment in the future.... through the highways systems, scientific and medical establishments and research, the communications system, the airline system, the education system. Taxes result in assets for all of us - schools, hospital, airlines, highways etc that come from wise tax investments.

In the first framework tax is generally bad, we pay too much of it, it bolsters "big government" and it should be distributed back among the people who originally paid it (as money in their pockets).

In the second framework tax is wise; it is an investment for the future; results in infrastructure and is an essential component of our society; it is a glue that holds us together.

In kick-starting any future debate about tax Labour needs to establish its framework first before introducing any policy or terms to describe changes it wishes to make.

The first principle is to say what you believe. What does Labour believe about tax?

One of the most important rules in setting public agendas is to tell the truth, and to always speak from your moral perspective.

To the voter - saying what you believe is more important than the issues being campaigned on. Ultimately, people vote for who they can identify with.

The use of simple language linking beliefs to describing a policy statement can be very powerful and strike a chord with the audience. For example:

Tax is ultimately an investment in our country and our future. If we didn't pay tax, we couldn't afford a decent school system for all our kids; we couldn't afford a hospital system that cares for everyone; we couldn't afford a public transport system; a decent roading system...

Because....

When my dad had a heart attack I didn't want to be worried about whether the care he received at the public hospital was the best care available - because I knew it was.

I want to know that the guy who drives my bus into town (and earns \$12 an hour) has access to the best health system and that his kids are going to a decent school.

I want my kids to receive dental care and vision and hearing testing at pre-school and school to pick up any early problems

I want to know that my child will receive a good base in pre-school education at my local child care centre and that I can afford to pay the child care bills

I want to know that when I need to make a choice about going back to work when my kids are little I don't feel pressured by the lack of affordable childcare if I go back to work, or family support if I choose to stay at home

Some solutions

How can Labour take charge of the language and frame important public debates in its own terms?

Firstly, each one of us - Labour members - can start to talk the talk. Of course it's easier said than done when confronted by the entrenched views and language of the opposition - when core Labour policy and initiatives are dismissed in hard-to-counter terms such as "nanny state", "social engineering" and "PC".

Below are a few suggested approaches and strategies that we in Labour could utilise more of:

1. Research

Firstly, Use market research to uncover people's values in different environments (home, work, school, political etc). This isn't about seeing how they respond to certain issues; rather to see what really motivates people, how they really think. The core population group to target for research are Labour hard core voters and swinging voters (those who may have voted Labour before and have thought about voting Labour).

Some of this work may have been done already. If so, go back and revisit it; re-do it if the right questions weren't asked.

Secondly, what are Labour values? A project should be established to clarify and articulate a set of core Labour values that are contemporary and resonate with most Labour members and voters.

2. Develop a new framework

Develop a metaphor to explain the moral and value system of New Zealand social progressive in our terms. Why is this so important?

Labour needs a new approach and a new way of speaking to the NZ public. This requires a metaphor for the new approach - a *fresh approach* which is about showing leadership to the rest of the world - that this little country at the end of the world can be a role model for harmony, peace, economic stability and steady growth; progressive ideas, inclusion and tolerance, optimism and creativity.

The *fresh approach* could be delivered across the board - not focussed on the leader. The approach should:

- See Labour play to its strengths - gruff common sense, plain speaking and wry humour
- See Labour acknowledge weaknesses and mistakes - say what it believes the mistakes are, and say what it must do to address them
- See Labour rediscover and re-articulate its core values and beliefs to the NZ public as a "vision" - a "new deal" a "blueprint for the next 5-10 years"
- Ensure those beliefs and values are transparent and "real". They must not be manufactured as "spin". They must truly reflect the values of the Labour Party today and the people who will run the next government. They must reflect where NZ Labour is at.

- See Labour forge its identity to be indistinguishable (not separate from) the New Zealand people
- It shouldn't be about government being the fixer of problems and the NZ public being the passive recipients. It must be a partnership - "together we can show the world"

3. Develop a new way of talking to people

- Use language drawn from research - Talk through the media to the ordinary person at home in their living room, or at work. Be consistent with a new set of phrases

"We've made mistakes"; "we've been having a good hard look at ourselves"; "we are listening to you"

- Develop a new economic language targeting middle NZ householders. Talk about the economic impact on their ordinary lives: Every time a media release is put out, a media conference is given, a speech made, a question answered in parliament, there should be a link back to how this impacts on the average family (use a range of different average families) and/or a small and/or medium sized business. Use phrases such as:
 - o Let's be realistic and honest
 - o We're about setting an example, one that persuades people that it's worth following
 - o We're about practising socially responsible, sustainable, economically sound government
 - o Talk about the common financial decisions and tasks that people confront - such as paying their bills; buying groceries at the supermarket; deciding whether to make improvements to the family home; deciding whether to upgrade the family car; planning for a special family holiday; making the decision about what school to send their kids to; buying their children a home computer; whether to take out medical insurance; how much to commit to a superannuation policy; whether you can afford to take your child to the doctor again; whether you can afford to take the whole family to the pictures in the school holidays. Make every issue a people issue and acknowledge that the consequences of some of those issues are hard

4. Use language to create *identity*

Position Labour as "being of the people"

Position National as = politics (enemies of the people)

Create an identity for Labour that mirrors positive core values of decent New Zealanders - so that people know what Labour is without having to talk about issues

Key words

Optimism, care, growth (steady but not at the cost of people), future, courageous (brave), confident, creative, good, inclusive, tolerant, listening, mature, kind, independent, proud, strong

I've been thinking..... *How we measure up*

I've been thinking - this is what we haven't been good at.... This is what we are good at.... this is what we're going to do about it

Present an honest self-appraisal of Labour in Govt over the last 6/7 years

Control the release

Encourage the discussion

Move on to where you want to be

5. Present NZ as a *role model for the world*

Have a way to describe the new approach

Talk about a *new deal, a fresh approach, "showing a good example"* to each other, *to the rest of the world*. Talk about *doing it together*, with community good examples - recognising our strengths, acknowledging our weaknesses, believing in ourselves...

- A country that values peace and harmony and tolerance and inclusion, that believes in respecting each other and showing leadership in our daily lives, and being prepared to lend a helping hand to those in need and sharing some of our own wealth if it means others have opportunity
- A country where creativity and innovation is applauded and where achievers can stand tall and be proud, where we encourage our young people to work hard and do their best, but recognise we all have different abilities
- A country that stops talking itself down and gets real about what it can and should change

6. Take the high ground

Don't you think...

We should see tax as an investment rather than something that needs to be cut, or we need relief from

We should invest in people's future not welfare dependency

Everyone deserves the right to dignity

We should build a society which supports those who need support from time to time

A civilised society values all its members

We should preserve the planet for our children's children

It's selfish to pollute or exploit now and expect our children's generation to clean up after us

7. Do not use their language

Learn how to use Labour language. All the time. Don't mention their terms; re-phrase the questions asked by the media to allow you to answer in your terms. Every time you say the words "PC, tax cuts, welfare dependency, racially-based policies" the framework of the opposition is invoked and your framework is so much harder to introduce or discuss.

We need to find other words than theirs to describe National's policies.

8. Tell the truth

It's got to be a moral vision and it's got to truly reflect what you think for it to ring true with people. Sometimes it means taking risks and knowing that the idea may be unpopular. But if the idea, the policy fits within an established framework it will be much easier for people to understand and easier for them to accept.

9. Talk about values - what you stand for

Frame your arguments around core values, not around who's putting forward the issue.

Most people want to know what you stand for, whether your values are theirs, and what direction you want to take the country in.

10. Be respectful and don't be aggressive

People don't want to see (or hear) politicians slagging off at each other. They don't want politicians to use personal criticism as a weapon. They don't want to hear us do it either.

The process

1. Start using different language, particularly when talking about economic issues (always use a real people example). Use language based on values (uncovered in the research). Talk about **we** (not Labour and everyone else - make Labour the **we**)
2. Talk more about the future - the sort of country we want to be in five/10 years time. Invite people to participate in the discussion
3. Establish a think tank which is well funded, well structured and arms length from Labour but clearly "for" socially progressive values. The think tank will develop policy ideas and create and shape public debate.

In conclusion - some strategies for all Labour members

A simple way to frame the debate
Using our language and our values:

DO:

- Talk about your values and beliefs - what you stand for and what Labour stands for
- Think about and use the language which describes those values and beliefs
- Use open-ended questions to explore the other person's beliefs
- Try to find a point of agreement from which you can move forward
- Practice it - with your family, friends and colleagues

DON'T

- Buy into the language and assumptions of the other side
- Be confrontational