‘THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY’: THE DISCURSIVE DYNAMICS OF POLICY REFORM

ABSTRACT

Sustainability is now among the hegemonic discourses used by government to construct problems and policy beyond the environmental domain. Detached from its origins, it functions as an ‘empty signifier’ whose flexibility and ambiguity can be harnessed in policymaking and political debate. This paper uses an Australian case study to show how sustainability discourse was mobilized to justify reversing a previous decision and raise the age at which publicly-funded aged pension could be accessed. Overall, it contributes to understanding how hegemonic intervention is accomplished by tracing discursive processes over time and amongst different texts, helping to identify shifts and turning points in trajectories of policy reform and political debate. I conclude by arguing the use of sustainability discourse warrants particular critical attention because it signals broader difficulties in imagining alternative collective futures and considering the costs and consequences arising from current arrangements.
INTRODUCTION

Language and struggles over meaning are central to politics, policymaking and its implementation (Taylor, 2004; Yanow, 2007; Howarth, 2009; Fairclough, 2013). With the rise of increasingly sophisticated and tightly managed political communication, understanding the processes by which certain discourses achieve dominance and the uses to which they are put are more important than ever. This paper traces how a particular discourse – sustainability – was used in the area of pension reform to rhetorically redescribe and justify a reform that had been rejected outright by both major political parties in Australia – raising the pensionable age in Australia in 2009 from 65 to 67 years.

Originally a discourse of the environment, ‘sustainability’ has become so widespread that Cox and Béland (2013, p. 307) assert it constitutes a new “policy paradigm” the prominence of which will rise over the coming decades. Now used to construct and frame a wide range of social problems, it is a signifier that has been gradually emptied of its earlier meanings, allowing it to be deployed in various ways by those involved in political management, lobbying and policymaking to integrate diverse and conflicting concerns. While sustainability is certainly not the only discourse to become hegemonic, its use warrants critical attention because of its inherent temporality: according to Brown (2016) it signals an inability to meaningfully engage with alternative versions of the future. If politics and policy are fundamentally concerned with “the future shaping of collective life” (Kögl & Kurtz 2013, p. 63) then when sustainability discourse is mobilized, this may suppress, rather than encourage, deliberation.

The functions and implications of sustainability discourse are explored in relation to a policy area where it has had a noticeable impact (Boeri et al., 2001; Cox & Béland, 2013) – pension reform. The costs of state-funded old age pensions represent a recurrent concern for
many developed economies who have responded in various ways, including raising the age at which the pension can be accessed (the pensionable age) (Brooks, 2005; Tsarouhas, 2012; Orenstein, 2013). This case focuses on how this evolved in an Australian context, where substantial reform of economic and financial systems, including retirement incomes policy, had already been undertaken throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and the economy had been buoyed by an extended mining boom. The prospect of raising the pensionable age had been rejected outright by both major political parties until 2008 and yet, this position was reversed in the Federal Budget of May 2009. Government communication around the decision relied heavily on sustainability discourse with repetition of the formulaic phrase “secure and sustainable pension reform” (e.g. Swan & Macklin, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

The analysis focuses on identifying how this discourse was used to justify policy reversal by tracking trends in argumentation in the seven years prior to the May 2009 announcement and its immediate aftermath. This approach is intertextual in nature (Bakhtin, 1981; Billig, 1996; Allen, 2000): it traces the relationships between arguments and texts, such as why and how some ideas, language and arguments are reproduced and achieve dominance. It is also necessarily historical: understanding the context within which arguments were made, including responses and counterarguments (Hajer, 1995; Billig, 1996) assists in understanding the impact of sustainability discourse surrounding the decision. Overall, the study contributes to understanding how hegemonic intervention is accomplished and illustrates the value in tracing discursive processes over time and amongst different related types of texts in order to identify the shifts and turning points in trajectories of policy reform and political debate.

The paper begins by outlining the tradition of political discourse theory used to inform the study, then explains how sustainability functions as an empty signifier whose strategic ambiguity is highly useful to those involved in political communication and policy
making. This is followed by an overview of pension reform and the Australian context. The findings section traces how the decision to raise the pensionable age was constructed in public and political debate and government communications from the period 1998 to 2010 using the language of sustainability. This is followed by a discussion of how the case enhances understanding of the discursive processes through which meaning is stabilized, yet remains ambiguous enough to facilitate coalition-building, and why the use of sustainability discourse should prompt critical reflection.

**SUSTAINABILITY AS HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE**

There are a variety of ways of analysing and understanding discourse and its relationship to power, politics and policy. Theoretically, this study draws mainly from the work of Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau, 1990; Mouffe, 1993; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Laclau, 2005) combined with methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Taylor, 2004; Fairclough, 2013) specifically argumentation or rhetoric, linguistics and intertextuality, to provide an empirically grounded case of the evolution of sustainability discourse in relation to a specific issue and a particular time and place. After explaining the key theoretical concepts, I discuss why sustainability discourse warrants critical attention when it is invoked in policy and political communication.

For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is both productive and repressive. It is not just a “shared way of apprehending the world” (Dryzek, 2013, p. 9) but an “articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations” (Howarth, 2009, p. 311), by excluding that which is antagonistic to its logic, e.g., alternative ways of selecting and constructing social problems and what should be done to respond to them. Discourse and power are permanently in flux and unstable – meanings which appear to be “fixed” or part of “objective reality” are
the result of hegemonization (Barnes & Hoerber, 2013), where one worldview has come to
dominate to the extent it is no longer ‘seen’ and becomes taken-for-granted, effacing its
origins.

Particular discourses attempt “to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow
of differences, to construct a centre” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001, p. 112) by temporarily fixing
meaning around “nodal points”. These act as foci around which relational meanings and
chains of equivalence can be established. They are often “empty signifiers”: signifiers highly
familiar but which have been emptied of meaning to the extent they can deployed in flexible
ways, to name, integrate, stabilize and give meaning to, a varied collection of phenomena and
practices. Such signifiers are highly useful to those involved in political communication,
management and policymaking, because of their “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg, 1984,
2007; Leitch & Davenport, 2007) and openness. This enables them to be deployed to
“monopolise areas of problem definition” (Gottweis, 2003, p. 256) by “rhetorically
redescribing” them (Skinner, 2002, p. 186) so as to dismiss other interpretations of social and
economic conditions, facilitate consensus-building and obscure conflict, consequences and
alternatives.

Empty signifiers are particularly amenable to hegemonic intervention because they
“exist in different discourses and different social or institutional terrains and are thus
inherently ambivalent. Such signifiers are ubiquitous and invisible, and their ambivalence
normally troubles no one” (Rear & Jones, 2013, p. 380). Their use becomes self-reinforcing,
causing them to spread and become more familiar, taken-for-granted and applied in
circumstances far removed from their origins (Howarth, 2009; Skinner, 2002, p. 186).
Discursive analysis can help to defamiliarize hegemonic understandings by, for example,
showing their contingency, the uses to which they are put in specific contexts, the processes
through which they come to dominate meaning and the alternatives and consequences they exclude.

Sustainability is arguably such an empty signifier – borrowed from the environmental domain but now a ‘keyword’ (Williams, 1983; Phillips, 1996) for a discourse that has become hegemonic and used to construct a wide range of social problems and policy responses. It provides a familiar and pre-legitimized “story-line” or trope which condenses complexity and indeterminacy, facilitating discursive closure, problem definition and policy solutions. To be ‘anti-sustainability’ seems unthinkable because as a heuristic device, sustainability seems plausible and “sounds right” (Hajer 1995, pp. 56, 62). Yet it is precisely when discourses have become dominant and largely unquestioned that critical analysis of their function and affects is most needed (Hajer, 1995; Fischer, 2003). It is, of course, not the only signifier that has achieved hegemonic status in political and policy discourse, however, there are reasons why its use should prompt critical interest.

The ‘something’ about sustainability

In the modern era, sustainability discourse has its origins in debates of the 1960s and 1970s about the environmental impact of population and economic growth and the need to preserve and protect ecosystems. However, by the end of the 1980s, the term ‘sustainable development’ had become hegemonic, a term which privileged economic growth as a fundamental value. In the widely-cited “Brundtland report”, the World Commission of Environment and Development (WECD, 1987) defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of present generations without comprising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 43). The ambiguity of the term has been widely critiqued and yet this was part of its usefulness – open enough to facilitate
communication among diverse groups while obscuring deep-seated conflicts between them (Hajer, 1995).

Beyond the environmental domain, the flexibility of sustainability and its openness of meaning has enabled it to be used in diverse ways to construct, frame, and act upon, a wide range of social problems. For example, in urban planning, Davidson (2010) has shown how the lack of shared understanding of ‘social sustainability’ enabled, rather than impeded, collaboration between local government and non-government organizations. Similarly, in analysing New Zealand policy documents on biotechnology and GMO, Leitch and Davenport (2007) concluded the strategic ambiguity of sustainability was highly functional in two ways: it lent a lexical coherence to the documents themselves as well as enabling conflicting perspectives to co-exist and parties with deep-seated differences to participate in policy debate. The flexibility of sustainability has also been demonstrated in research by Howarth and Griggs (2006). In their study, they traced how the UK aviation industry co-opted “sustainability” to counter assertions from environmental groups and community groups that further development was “unsustainable” and unwarranted by using terms such as “sustainable growth” and “sustainable aviation”. The meaning of sustainability is thus highly dependent on the context of its use and the policy phenomena it is used to construct: van Gervan’s (2019) research on the framing of responsibility for aged care in China illustrates how versions of sustainability vary depending on cultural values.

Yet ambiguity and flexibility are characteristics of all empty signifiers. What then is specific or special about the discourse of sustainability, as far as policymaking and political communication is concerned?

Brown (2016) argues that while sustainability functions in contemporary political and policy discourse as an “empty signifier” it is “not quite empty”, that is to say, it has a latent
meaning or significance generated by its relationship to other discourses that concerns collective imagined futures. All discourses have limits, marked by that which cannot be accommodated within the discourse itself. When sustainability discourse is invoked, he asserts it is a sign multiple dominant discourses in a society have failed to incorporate their consequences or “recognize ‘the future’ as a residual category” (p. 115). Frequently used, and most powerful, in its negative form (Jameson, 1998; Hossay, 2006), the claim that current arrangements are ‘unsustainable’ mobilizes an implicit argument for change because continuation of what is known and familiar (and thus implicitly valued) is threatened:

the future becomes a kind of intolerable imaginary – a vaguely structured mental space onto which diverse apocalyptic visions may be projected. At its most politically effective, this imaginary is “unthinkable”. It assumes a general tendency towards decline, but thought is suspended before the elaboration of the specific future conditions that people will have to live with. (Brown, 2016, p. 124)

If politics and policymaking are basically concerned with debate about “the future shaping of collective life” (Kögl & Kurtz 2013, p. 63) then the use of sustainability discourse has broader implications, signalling more general and fundamental contradictions and antagonisms. Its mobilization could thus alert us to broader ‘political conditions’ and cultural anxieties that exist at a certain time and place (Brown, W. 2006; Dobernak, 2010). However, in order to understand the political dimensions of the deployment of sustainability and how it is used in hegemonic intervention, we need to trace the “micro-politics of meaning”. Showing how hegemonization takes place over time, the discursive processes through which it is accomplished, and what is excluded or suppressed in relation to a specific policy area will enhance knowledge of “the analytics of government” (Gottweis, 2003, pp. 257, 262). While sustainability discourse is flexible, its meaning needs to be temporarily fixed because some degree of discursive closure is required to formulate concrete policy (cf. Kögl & Kurtz,
2013): how then, do these particular meanings emerge, come to dominate, and enable policy action?

While we can assume language is important in social and political life such a question cannot be answered in the abstract (Hajer, 1995) because “the role of discourse in social practices cannot be taken for granted but has to be established through analysis” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 240). Accordingly, this research seeks to explain how sustainability as empty signifier and discourse became a hegemonic way of constructing, naming and understanding a policy ‘problem’ unconnected to the environment – the public costs of an ageing population. More specifically, it focuses on showing how it was used to frame an explicit policy reversal by tracing its emergence and reproduction in a chain of policy and public texts over a 12-year period during which it became a ‘nodal point’ around which meaning was organized and came to dominate political debate. Before outlining how analysis was undertaken, I explain the context in which this took place, including an overview of the retirement incomes systems in Australia and the role played by the aged pension, which was at the heart of the change.

A case of pension reform

One area in which sustainability discourse has had an impact is pension reform. While it does not concern the environment, it certainly shares sustainability’s original tension – the distribution of costs and benefits between current and future generations. The terms of this intergenerational deal have been the subject of extensive and ongoing public debate about pensions in European countries. For example, Tsarouhas (2012) traced the ways changes to the aged pension were discursively constructed with different degrees of success in a comparative study of Italy and Greece. However, Australia’s pension system differs from
that of many other developed countries in ways that lessen its costs to Government: its retirement incomes approach has been described as ‘unique’ among OECD countries (Disney & Johnson, 2001). The pension is non-contributory, funded out of general revenue (current taxation), designed to alleviate poverty, and means-tested for both income and assets, making the wealthy ineligible (King, Bækgaard & Harding, 2001; Bateman, 2005; Spies-Butcher & Stebbing, 2011). Payments can also be progressively withdrawn to reflect increases in income. Its status as a safety net for the most vulnerable older people (for example, single women, long-term unemployed, renters) has been reinforced since the early 1990s with the introduction of mandated employment-based superannuation. In this regard, Australia was an “early mover” in the privatization of retirement income (Orenstein, 2013). Consistent with the pursuit of “economic rationalism” or neoliberalism (Head 1988; Pusey 2018) that characterized the Hawke-Keating Labor Government from the mid-1980s on, individuals have been encouraged to assume financial responsibility for themselves in older age rather than rely on a tax-funded old age pension (Evans & Kelley, 2004). The Superannuation Guarantee Act (1992) requires employers to pay 9.5% of employee earnings to an employee’s account and individuals can make additional voluntary contributions which attract favourable tax treatment. However, even after those covered by compulsory superannuation reach retirement age, the age pension is likely to remain important to the Australian retirement incomes system (Harmer, 2009).

On balance then, and according to the Government’s own modelling, Australia was in a relatively fortunate position to other countries in relation to the cost of its age pension. As late as 2007, both the conservative Coalition Parties (made up of the Australian Liberals and National Parties), in power from 1996 until 2007, and the Australian Labor Party, which held office from 2007-2010, had rejected raising the pensionable age. Yet in 2009, in a comparatively favourable economic context, treasurer Wayne Swan announced on Budget
night the age threshold would be progressively lifted from 65 to 67 years. Government communication around the decision relied heavily on the discourse of sustainability with repetition of phrases such as “secure and sustainable pensions” and despite valid critique, the change was passed. The following sections explain how the evolution of the debate was traced, how the decision was justified and what functions sustainability discourse played in this context.

METHOD

All publicly available texts from 1998 to 2010 were collected that contained references to raising the pensionable age. This period was chosen because 1998 marks the start of a cycle of policy and public discussion about population ageing with the introduction of the Charter of Budget Honesty Act. This requires the government of the day to address the “financial implications of demographic change” and the “long-term sustainability of current Government policies” over a forty-year horizon in the form of an Intergenerational Report (IGR) every five years. Data collection was extended to the end of 2010 to include any debate and coverage that followed the announcement (in May 2009) of the decision.

Among these texts were major reports released and/or commissioned by the federal government as well as other organizations such as private thinktanks; government policy documents, speeches and media releases; reading speeches and parliamentary debates in the upper and lower houses of federal parliament; and media coverage. This included searching for texts representing the views of actors other than the government of the day, particularly those critical of raising the pensionable age, such as trade union bodies, social welfare organizations, advocacy and interest groups, public commentators and opposition and minority parties.
Texts were then organized in a catalogue according to date of release, whether they mentioned raising the pension age, their support or opposition for such a move and the arguments and explanations given for these positions. This allowed identification of when the prospect was first mentioned in public debate and which texts and arguments appeared to be more or less influential by tracing whether and how they were referenced in subsequent texts. Analysis also focused on the language used by actors and the “social construction of the need to reform” (Cox, 2001, p. 464), often taking the form of argumentative ‘storylines’ (Hajer, 1995; Stone, 2012), particularly about the risk of decline (i.e. that current conditions would worsen if action was not taken) (see Stone, 2012; Blum & Kuhlmann, 2019). Texts were therefore examined not just for the presence of sustainability discourse but how it was used to argue a point of view and potentially repeated in a chain of interactions and exchanges. The approach is thus explicitly focused on analysing intertextual relationships which, if traced over time, can assist in understanding how a discourse becomes hegemonic and influences the trajectory of policy reform.

FINDINGS

Pre-2007: Bipartisan rejection of increasing the pensionable age

The possibility of increasing the pensionable age in Australia had been publicly raised before 2008 but each time it was rejected unequivocally by both major parties. For example, a brief item appeared in the national press in 2002 indicating that Labor, then in federal opposition, had acquired an internal government document recommending raising the pension age to 70. Then-Treasurer, Peter Costello, denied this was under consideration (Gordon, 2002) as did the minister for Family and Community Services at the time, Senator Amanda Vanstone, who
immediately issued a media released titled “Absolutely no increase in pension age” (Vanstone, 2002) in which she reinforced her party’s commitment to liberal values of individual choice:

The Government has absolutely no intention of increasing the qualifying age for the aged pension. Any reports of a secret agenda to the contrary are simply wrong… While some public debate has taken place about Australians working longer, this is a matter for individual choice and not something the Government is proposing to mandate.

Over the next five years, each time the possibility of increasing the pension age was publicly discussed, the federal government reaffirmed its commitment to retaining the current threshold age. A number of reasons were given. For example, in the first Intergenerational Report (IGR) of 2002-2003, the age pension was not seen as a major “burden” (p. 10) because of the introduction of private superannuation (p. 67). Non ageing-related factors such as health care (e.g. demand for more sophisticated diagnosis and treatment and the publicly funded pharmaceutical benefits scheme) represented a greater problem (p. 35).

Moreover, both in this and subsequent government reports, (e.g. Treasury 2004a, 2004b; The Productivity Commission 2005), including the second IGR (2007), Australia’s position was compared favourably to other OECD countries. Each time international comparisons were invoked, they were used to argue Australia did not need to follow suit in raising its pension age, because its retirement income system had already been reformed and its pension was a means-tested ‘safety-net’ targeted at alleviating poverty, not a universal benefit. This reasoning was also reflected in media reporting around the issue (e.g. Morris, 2006; Samson, 2007). If anything, the situation had improved since the first IGR of 2002-2003: labour force participation rates for those aged 55-64 had increased as had fertility rates.
Combined with the impact of skilled migration, tighter means testing of the age pension and increased private superannuation, forecasts about publicly financing an ageing population were more optimistic.

Yet the prospect of raising the pension age was once again in the public domain that year due to media coverage of a very short report by the Committee for Economic Development Australia (CEDA) authored by Dr. David Knox, a former actuarial academic employed by Mercer consulting. As suggested by its title *Pensions for Longer Life*, its main argument was that the pension age should be raised to reflect increases in life expectancies, because no change had occurred since 1909. While the report calculated savings to government at $800 million, it stressed the more important reason for change was “psychological” (2007, p. 7), i.e. to shift community expectations to encourage people to work longer. Again, the proposal was met with bipartisan rejection. In the media Treasurer Peter Costello stated rather than increasing the pension age, the Government was incentivizing people to delay retirement by “improving the superannuation system… So we want to do this with carrots, …. rather than with the stick of changing the qualification age for the aged pension” (Australian Associated Press, 10 October 2007). Federal Labor spokesperson, Jenny Macklin said “Labor also would not change the pension age… senior Australians deserved to be able to retire after a lifetime of contribution” (Khadem, 2007).


However, after the Australian Labor Party was elected in 2007, in addition to launching a Senate Inquiry into cost-of-living pressures on older Australians, they initiated two major reviews, both of which advocated raising the pension age in similar ways to the earlier CEDA report. The first, convened by Dr. Jeff Harmer, was a ‘Pension Review Taskforce’ inquiring
into the adequacy of pensions (known as the Harmer Report) and the second, led by Ken Henry was a review of ‘Australia’s Future Tax System’ which addressed pensions as part of its broader remit (known as the Henry Review). Both reviews undertook extensive public consultation processes and the documents they produced referred to each. The final report of the Harmer Pension Review Taskforce was released first (in February 2009) and recommended, among other things, increases in pension amounts for those worst-off (e.g. single pensioners living alone, pensioners who did not own their own homes), as well as a phased increase in the pensionable age to 67 years. Using the language of sustainability and security, the report explained the second measure was important for the government to be able to afford the first:

…the long-term sustainability of the pension system is a crucial issue for governments, and for pensioners: financial security can only be achieved for pensioners if the pension system is sustainable. (p. 128)

Nevertheless, an argument similar to the one offered in the earlier 2007 CEDA report was apparent. Under a theme entitled “Sustainability and targeting”, the report argued raising the pension age would contribute to “community norms… [and]… help to set retirement expectations”. (p. xix)

The Henry Review’s terms of reference were much broader but it also recommended raising the pension age. Again, the framing and justification for the change was reminiscent of the earlier CEDA report: presentation of demographic analysis relating to increasing life expectancies preceded and was used to justify the change accompanied by statements about its capacity to send “a strong social signal about work and retirement expectations and their link to increasing life expectancies” (2009, p. 16). The CEDA report was also explicitly referenced (p. 9) in relation to international comparisons between Australia’s position and
other OECD countries. Here, rather than differentiating Australia as “relatively fortunate” and thus not needing to raise its pension age, as argued a few years prior (e.g. 2005 Productivity Commission Report, IGR 2007), the actions of other countries were used to justify the proposed increase in Australia. Sustainability was explicitly stated to be one of the main objectives of the retirement income system, defined as meaning the system was “financially sound and detracts as little as possible from economic growth” (p. 7) or “fiscal sustainability” (e.g. p. 32). Older people’s participation in the labour market or retirement was constructed as the outcome between individual decision-making and system-level incentives or penalties, with little recognition of the role played by employers. Government should maintain the age pension as a “safety-net” enabling the most vulnerable to make decisions about their “financial security”. However, threats to the security of the retirement income system were implied through the discourse of sustainability and the commonly used building metaphor of its “three pillars”: the government-funded aged pension, compulsory occupational superannuation and private savings. These pillars were constructed as having “structural weaknesses” that required strengthening to withstand economic shocks and continue to provide support:

There is a need and an opportunity to calibrate the three-pillar architecture to better meet the future challenges, and to reform some structural weaknesses within the system. (p. 2)

This included creating stronger integration, principally between the age pension and superannuation. In addition to raising the pensionable age, the Henry Review proposed reducing tax assistance to high income earners on superannuation contributions. They also recommended gradually increasing the preservation age of superannuation (the age at which it could be accessed) to eventually align with the pension.
The announcement and its aftermath: 2009-2010 Budget

The decision to increase the pensionable age was announced by then-federal treasurer Wayne Swan on budget night, May 12, 2009 (Australia, 2009a; Swan, 2009) as part of a series of changes including increases to the amount received by current, particularly single, pensioners. In the texts produced to explain the budget, several discursive strategies dominated. In the Treasurer’s speeches, for example, the overall storyline was that Australia was in a strong economic position relative to other developed countries but risked being overwhelmed by uncontrollable forces unless action was taken now to secure “long term savings for fiscal sustainability” (p. 2). And while the actual threat was economic, the language and imagery referenced the risk of natural disasters to which Australia is particularly vulnerable, such as the Black Saturday bushfires of January 2009.

His speech began “This Budget is forged in the fire of the most challenging global economic conditions since the Great Depression” and depicted the global financial crisis as a “brutal, uncompromising force” which Australians would have to unite to withstand (p.1) or be dragged under by the recessions plaguing other countries. Here Australia has an ambiguous relationship to the rest of the world - on the one hand, the treasurer is at pains to emphasize Australian’s relative economic strength but on the other, as a small economy and geographically isolated country, it is no match for the magnitude of global economic forces. The argument is that because the global economic environment is uncontrollable, Australia should follow the example of other developed economies and raise its pension age to reflect longer life expectancy, otherwise it risks standing alone. By raising the pension age, the system could be “sustained” into the future and make increases for current pensioners affordable. Those already in receipt of the pension were reassured their benefits were
guaranteed – the changes would only affect those yet to reach pensionable age. Current pensioners were discussed in humanizing terms (“our pensioners and carers”) as a group who deserve fairness and for whom Australia carries a shared responsibility. In contrast, future pensioners were absent, implicit only in abstract, depersonalizing, references to the pension system.

The language of sustainability recurs throughout these texts (appearing 14 times) in relation to the overall economy (e.g. “sustainable growth”) and government spending (e.g. “fiscal sustainability”). In comparison, it was largely absent in Swan’s budget speeches in 2008 and 2010. In 2009, it was used almost exclusively to announce the pension reforms encapsulated under the heading “Secure and sustainable pensions” (Australia 2009a). The words “secure” and “sustainable” and their variants were coupled into a ‘condensed term’ (Garnsey & Rees, 1996) repeated across all government publications, speeches, media releases, media appearances and political and parliamentary debate and across different government portfolios. However, the meaning of “secure” changed depending on the government department and their target audience. Treasury used “secure” to suggest Australia collectively risked not having a pension at all in the future if the pension age was not raised; whereas from the Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (who actually administered pension payments) “secure” was used to reassure current pensioners their income was safe and certain (i.e. they would have enough and know what they would receive and when) (Swan & Macklin, 2009c).

In the parliamentary debates and public discussion that followed, the increase was criticized but also received wide support and endorsement, including by the conservative Coalition party, then in opposition. Malcolm Turnbull, a senior member of the Coalition, was quoted as saying it should have happened sooner (Horin & Dart, 2009) while Tony Abbott, then-shadow Treasurer, also endorsed the change. In his parliamentary response to the
second reading speech to introduce the change (Australia 2009b), he commented the current situation of people ceasing work in their 50s was “unsustainable”. However, he criticized the government for increasing current pension payments as “deferring any burdens” onto future generations. He also used the opportunity to address objections raised by some unions and peak welfare bodies about the impact raising the pension age would have on manual labourers.

The truth is that we do not actually have very many 64-year-old bricklayers. Most people in those sorts of occupations have sought other work well before that age, or let us be blunt, have gone on to other forms of benefit. (Australia, 2009b, p. 6137)

This “other form of benefit” was the disability support pension, a claim disputed by left-wing parliamentarians and trade union leaders such as ALP senator Doug Cameron, who argued greater numbers on disability support would nullify any savings to government, as had happened in Norway. The national secretaries of two major unions - John Sutton of the CFMEU (Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union) and Dave Oliver of the AMWU (Australian Manufacturing Workers Union) – were particularly vocal and threatened “revolt” at the ALP national conference that July (Franklin, 2009). They maintained those in manual jobs had often started work at much younger ages (Edwards, 2009), their “bodies” had been “broken” by years of hard physical labour, and the age pension was a “fundamental right”. Forcing them to continue work for an additional two years would be a “false economy”: it would increase the incidence of workplace injury and rehabilitation (WorkplaceInfo, 2009). Employer groups also criticized the move as creating potential contradictions between workplace occupational health and safety and anti-discrimination obligations (Ong, 2009).

The other major criticism raised by unions, welfare bodies and The Australian Greens concerned equity between the age pension and superannuation on the one hand, and the age
pension and other types of welfare payments on the other. Federal Greens senator, Rachel Siewert, took issue with the government’s use of the language of sustainability, not because of its connections with the environment, but because it ignored how the budget impacted on other vulnerable groups:

If the current pension rates cannot adequately sustain a single age pensioner and of course we have demonstrated very clearly that they cannot – it is not at all clear to us, and again no rationale was presented, how they expect sole parents, those on unemployment support and their families to survive. (Australia 2009c, p. 4117)

Moreover, increases in payments to aged pensioners were partly funded by reducing benefits to single parents and the unemployed:

It is clear that in this context the term “sustainable” is not used in the sense of being sustainable for families. In fact, it is misused to refer narrowly to the economic sustainability of the budget rather than to the health and wellbeing of families, particularly children (Australia 2009c, p. 4119).

As a welfare payment then, the age pension was more generous than other benefits. And as a source of retirement income, it would be out-of-step with the preservation age for superannuation. If the goal was to encourage people to work longer, then critics reasoned this was undermined by the different eligibility ages between the pension and superannuation. Claire Martin, head of the peak body for welfare groups, ACOSS (Australian Council of Social Service), wrote in a piece for the national broadcaster, the ABC, it would create greater inequity among older people. Accepting the pension age would have to rise “at some stage” she contended current moves would further disadvantage those already “locked out of the workforce”:
By raising the pension age to 67 and leaving the superannuation preservation age untouched, the Federal Government has started at the wrong end of the problem. Those who have the least capacity to keep working (people fully reliant on social security) are being asked to wait until they reach 67 years, while those with the greatest capacity (people with substantial superannuation) can transition to retirement from 55 years. (Martin, 2009)

This was echoed by left wing unions, members of the Australian Labor Party and some journalists, noting the Harmer Report and Henry Review’s recommendations on superannuation had not been adopted by the government (Steketee, 2009). Others commented leaving the superannuation preservation age untouched allowed individuals to spend their superannuation, then qualify for the age pension (Maiden, 2009). Alternative ways of boosting government revenue should be considered such as changing the favourable tax treatment of superannuation (Horin, 2010). Yet much of the media coverage following the decision did not dispute the need to raise the pension age citing expert “consensus” on the issue (e.g. Griffiths, 2009; Horin & Dart, 2009). Even if criticisms of the reform were included, it enabled the Government to respond by reiterating that the change was the only “responsible” course of action, necessary to keep the pension system “sustainable” (Horin & Dart, 2009).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to show the multiple processes through which discursive hegemonization occurred enabling sustainability discourse to be used to rhetorically frame an explicit policy reversal and neutralize opposition. Tracing these processes over time and through intertextual chains enabled key ‘ideological moments’ to be identified, moments which in retrospect
represented turning points in the trajectory of political debate and policymaking. This section
discusses these processes in more detail, highlighting their broader relevance, and explains
why the use of sustainability discourse has particular significance in policymaking and
political communication.

Empty signifiers that exist in different domains are particularly amenable to
hegemonic intervention because of their familiarity, flexibility and ambiguity. However, at
the same time, some fixation of meaning needs to occur to enable concrete policy action. In
this case, the meaning of sustainability was stabilized through collocation - combining it with
other words in phrases or terms. In some instances adjectives were used to specify or ‘close
down’ the version of sustainability being invoked, for example, fiscal sustainability, financial
sustainability; in others sustainable was joined with other words and this phrasing repeated so
they became ‘condensed terms’ (Garnsey and Rees, 1996) or political catchphrases: “secure
and sustainable”. In addition, ‘sustainable’ was used as an adjective to qualify and precede
fundamental and unquestioned values as in the phrase “sustainable [economic] growth”. In all
occurrences, the use of sustainability and its variants either explicitly denoted or implied
economic or financial sustainability. The coupling of sustainability with financial matters
and with security inferred its opposite, that is, that without such policy reform the pension
system, government finances and the economic circumstances of current old age pensioners
was at risk.

Hegemony did not prevent opposing views to be publicly aired: minority political
parties, unions and welfare bodies did question the capacity of the change to meet its stated
objectives and why only the “sustainability” of government finances and economic position
of current aged pensioners was being discussed. However, by responding the reform was
needed to safeguard the continued existence of the aged pension, i.e. to make the system
“secure and sustainable”, the government was able to reply without engaging with the
substantive content of the critique. Tracing how sustainability discourse was used in conjunction with other language, and featured in government communication, enabled identification of a pattern whereby repetition of condensed terms temporarily fixed meaning, encouraged political coalitions and discouraged deliberation in the public sphere.

However, hegemonization happens not just through repeating particular language but putting it to rhetorical use. Analysing how sustainability discourse featured in argumentation helped to show that its use changed over time as well as identifying key ideological moments or turning points in public debate. The first substantive proposal to raise the pension age was contained in a CEDA report in 2007, justified by an explicit rationale: to shift individual and community expectations towards working longer, not to save the government money. In response, the conservative Government of the day responded by dismissing the suggestion as a “stick”, i.e. a punitive measure compelling people to keep working, rather than one that promoted liberal values of individual choice and encouragement through incentives tied to superannuation. Similarly, the report of both major reviews commissioned by the newly elected Labor Government in 2007-2008 argued greater government savings would be made by changing the preservation age and favourable tax treatment of superannuation. However, when the government announced its decision to raise the pension age, its justification was a wholly economic one: raising the pension age was necessary to minimize public costs that unless brought under control threatened the viability and future of the aged pension system itself.

In this regard, the case demonstrates why discursive policy analysis needs to incorporate an understanding of broader economic and political context as well as close textual and intertextual analysis. Here the material conditions faced by Australia as a result of population ageing and the costs of the aged pension had not changed since 2002 – if anything, they had improved since earlier forecasts. Even at that earlier time, Australia had
been compared favourably to the rest of the developed world in terms of its pension model. Yet in 2009 the macro-economic costs from population ageing were used to justify a ‘storyline’ that was both familiar and convincing, one that condensed and simplified the choices available and persuasive enough to obscure its inconsistency with previous policy stances, economic analyses and bipartisan rejection. Its meaning was also fixed in a way that reinforced the pre-existing paradigm of economic rationalism pursued by both Coalition and Labor governments since the mid-1980s (Head 1998; Pusey 2018). Thus, while the decision contradicted previous policy, sustainability discourse was used in ways consistent with prevailing political ideology and its privileging of economic growth. It was thus a reversal at the level of explicit policy, but a continuation at the underlying level of political paradigm (see Campbell, 1998).

The implicit threat the pension system would not exist at all if the changes were not passed was a particularly effective discursive strategy. Sustainability discourse works by harnessing the “affective dimension of politics” (Howarth 2009, p. 310): it evokes anxiety current systems may not continue, even when used in its positive forms (cf. Jamieson 1998), inhibiting capacity to think about the future, deterring generation and discussion of alternatives. In this case, it discouraged more fundamental reflection about the role of the age pension and equity both between and within different age groups. Was it a right and “reward for a lifetime of contribution” paying taxes as characterized by some members of the Labor Party and union movement, or a welfare payment to alleviate poverty? If the latter, a ‘safety net’ and poverty alleviation measure, why were present older people more deserving than others of government support? Current younger people would also become the pensioners of the future, penalized by the increased pensionable age. The decision reinforced that old age pensioners were more ‘deserving’ than other groups of government financial support in the present. Sustainability discourse helped to obscure the moral choices the government had
made, in prioritizing the needs of some groups over others. It thus constituted a policy narrative of both expansiveness and retrenchment (see Blum & Kuhlmann, 2019): expanding the benefits paid to existing age pensioners while simultaneously restricting access to it in the future. At this place and point in time, the language of safety, security and risk was central to fixing the meaning of sustainability in a particular way, one that activated a collective sense of responsibility for age pensioners but also vulnerability of Australia to “uncontrollable forces” whether that be natural disasters, extreme weather events or global financial conditions they had little prospect of influencing.

Of course, sustainability is only one of many discourses that have become hegemonic within policy and public administration. Powerful, dominant discourses have some features in common at least in terms of their operation and implications. If policy is a central means of “regulat[ing] latent social conflict” in modern societies (Hajer, 1995, p. 2), then the use of hegemonic discourses in policy-making plays a key role in discouraging reflection about the fundamental assumptions and values on which decisions are made and policy problems constructed. Yet as a hegemonic discourse, sustainability has additional significance. Brown (2016) argues its use suggests the collective future has become unimaginable because other discourses have failed to recognize, and account for, their consequences and costs. The possibility that economic growth and rising living standards will not continue, but stagnate or regress, and that government might need to intervene more, not less, in redistributing benefits to those of all ages who have little prospect of becoming financially self-reliant violates modernist liberal assumptions of progress and the role it prescribes for governments. Sustainability discourse thus has particular importance for policymaking arising from its interdiscursive relationships. If we accept that, at its heart, policy involves debate about collective futures, then the use of sustainability can tell us ‘something more’ about the political conditions of its context and the capacity of those involved to ‘recognize ‘the future’
as a meaningful category” (Brown, 2016, p. 115) and their willingness to engage in deliberation of alternatives.

While acceptance of this policy reversal to raise the pension age might be considered a rhetorical success, following Laclau and Mouffe (2001), we could expect the contradictions raised by sustainability discourse and the issues it excludes or avoids to resurface because the meaning of empty signifiers is only ever temporarily ‘fixed’ through hegemonic intervention. Such signifiers are inherently ambiguous and open to re-interpretation by other actors at different times and places. Tracing how the contradictions excluded or suppressed by the use of sustainability discourse re-emerge over a longer time period would assist in understanding the dynamics of discursive hegemonization and its potential destabilization. Future research could explore the conditions under which sustainability discourse ceases to be politically useful in rhetorically framing a policy area – this could shed more light on the limits of sustainability as an empty signifier and its tendency to render alternative futures “unthinkable”.


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Author/s:
Ainsworth, S

Title:
'There's something about sustainability': The discursive dynamics of policy reform

Date:
2021-12

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/250421