

## PRIME MINISTERS AND RHETORICAL GOVERNANCE

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### Dennis Grube

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Why do all prime ministers sound the same? This question is posed by Dennis Grube in *Prime Ministers and Rhetorical Governance*. Grube's central thesis is that prime ministerial rhetoric in Westminster democracies is a prisoner of institutional, path-dependent forces. Hitherto, the empirical study of political rhetoric of countries' leaders has been largely confined to the rhetoric of United State presidents (except, for example, Bennister, 2007, 2008). However, the growing personalization of politics, technological advantages and network governance have given prime ministerial rhetoric an integral role in modern governance. Grube's new book addresses this role in a non-US context, asserting that prime ministers' words 'prove the blood vessels of communication that will then flow through the body politic' (p. 13). Prime ministers' speeches and other rhetorical acts define and frame policy initiatives, and serve to implement new policies and persuade voters during elections.

The book follows an institutionalist perspective to explain patterns of prime ministerial rhetoric and to show how these rhetorical patterns influence governance in Westminster parliamentary democracies. The words of PMs have the power to frame how a nation's citizens see their political world, but at the same time PMs find themselves locked into following institutionalized rhetorical recipes. Grube empirically studies and compares political speeches from prime ministers in four Westminster democracies: the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

In chapter two the author presents the historical continuity of the use of political speech as an extra-parliamentary leadership tool in the United Kingdom. Grube's empirical chapters each have a different focus with regard to the extra-parliamentary rhetorical role of prime ministers. Grube discerns the institutionalized rhetorical patterns that govern the behaviour of prime ministers at different points in their incumbency: during elections (chapter 4), during new policy changes (chapter 5), when announcing policy intervention in sub-national jurisdictions (chapter 6) and when stepping down (chapter 7).

In chapter three, Grube introduces an overarching typology of the different rhetorical roles prime ministers have in the Westminster polity: world leader, party leader, local member, policy advocate and national representative. Each of these roles is illustrated by examples from speeches from prime ministers in all four countries. Chapter four

presents how prime ministerial rhetoric during elections can be divided into three phases: pre-government, first-term elections and post-second-term elections. Although each election has its own policy issues, Grube shows a 'rhetorical evolution' from critique on the predecessors and promise of change in pre-government elections, to a focus on accomplished successes and the need for an experienced team after the second-term election.

In chapter five, Grube demonstrates how prime ministers link a meta-narrative of a government with separate policy narratives that politically frame the 'story' of a new policy. The meta-narratives address the failure of the opposition to implement the reform when they were last in government, combined with the policy narrative claiming that the reform is (1) in the national interest, (2) fair and (3) the next logical step to take. In chapter six, based on a comparison of rhetorical prime ministership in multi-layered (federal) governments, such as Australia and Canada, Grube argues that prime ministers can follow two rhetorical patterns when launching a policy intervention in sub-national jurisdictions: the 'local hero' or the 'national statesman'. In chapter seven, Grube focuses on the way resigning prime ministers try to define their legacy. Resignation speeches emphasize both institutional continuity, such as the focus on the greatness of the democracy, and individual self-justification.

Chapter eight has an entirely different focus, e.g. the relation between prime ministers and their bureaucratic mandarins. Are public service leaders indeed acting as rhetorical agents of their prime minister or do they have an independent voice? Grube compares all public speeches of the cabinet secretary and the secretary to the treasury in the four Westminster systems between 2009 and 2010. The chapter concludes that although differences in visibility and openness in the different countries exist, the administrative actors stay within the parameters set by prime ministerial rhetoric.

Grube concludes from his study that the institutionalization of different rhetorical roles makes spontaneous diversion of prime ministers from this rhetorical pattern electorally risky and potentially politically damaging. Paradoxically, the institutionalized patterns that build expectations among stakeholders, at the same time form the basis for voters' distrust and for their complaints that 'all politicians are the same'. This explains why many citizens are so critical of and 'disenchanted' with politicians. The author advises that prime ministers should just 'be themselves' and that 'political rewards will follow', but does not say *how* prime ministers can be both authentic *and* successful. Prime ministers are forced into an institutionalized rhetorical straightjacket exactly because this pattern provides leaders with the rhetorical tools to achieve the best rhetorical outcomes whilst generating the least possible blame.

Thomas Cronin (2008) pointed to the same authenticity problem for political leaders in his article about political leaders as skilled actors. According to Cronin (2008, p. 459), 'we detest fakers and phoniness, yet yearn for Academy Award Oscar winning political performances'. Therefore, in order to authoritatively assess the value of authenticity in rhetorical governance, we would need to study those prime ministers who have successfully managed to break out of the institutionalized rhetorical patterns.

This brings me to the only downside of this book. Grube uses many rich and appealing cases of different Westminster prime ministers to underscore the various aspects of his thesis. His loose coupling of ideas and evidence makes it difficult to assess whether the evidence provided is more than anecdotal, as Grube uses a different timeframe for each chapter, featuring different prime ministers and conducting a semi-systematic comparison between the countries. Why use only two UK prime ministers in the second chapter, all

four countries without systematic differences between them in the other chapters and a comparison of only Australia and Canada in chapter six? As illustration of Grube's thesis, the use of these four countries is persuasive enough. Further research on institutionalized rhetorical patterns would require more empirical body, using both quantitative and more structured and counterfactual qualitative empirical evidence.

In conclusion, *Prime Ministers and Rhetorical Governance* is a well-written book which shows that in-depth research and resonating metaphors can form a mutual strengthening bond. 'Good riddance', 'All fired up', a 'Long winding road' and 'All we've been through': if Westminster prime ministers were DJs, their playlist would perpetually follow these songs in the same order, according to Grube. Grube reveals how the patterns of prime ministerial rhetoric are institutionally conditioned in four countries and why it is so hard for prime ministers to be successful and 'themselves' at the same time. Grube has laid out a resonating thesis and provides useful typologies to use for further studies on rhetorical governance. *Prime Ministers and Rhetorical Governance* is an essential read for those who are interested in the powers and boundaries of political speech and rhetoric and can also inform those who try to understand the basis of voters' distrust in politics.

## REFERENCES

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