

How to talk about **economics**: A Guide for Changing the Story

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About this project

We're at a crossroads. The dominant neoliberal story is dying. We need a new narrative to take the country forward.

With consistent effort we can reframe core debates in our values, and focus on outcomes for people. We can ensure our words cut through with repetition by diverse but aligned voices.

This economic narrative guide is a project of Australian Progress, a national organisation dedicated to building the advocacy capacity of civil society. It follows earlier narrative projects on climate change and people seeking asylum.

It is based on the insight, collaboration and investment of a diversity of organisations: including the Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania), Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, GetUp, Community and Public Sector Union, National Union of Workers (Victoria), Australian Council of Social Services, United Voice and NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association.

We all need more persuasive ways of talking about the issues we care about, write about and champion: from reliable jobs to a strong social safety net, affordable housing, quality healthcare and a thriving natural world.

Starting this project, we sought a new story to overthrow the unfettered free-market, trickle down narrative that has dominated our political and economic discourse for decades. We wanted to move past advocacy which merely prevented the worst from happening, to a transformational story that can change what's possible in our politics.

We knew that many of these debates were happening in our opponents' frame. But we'd been swimming in their pool so long that we lacked a language, a proper foundation, to tell our own story.

We realised we didn't know enough about how Australians currently conceptualise 'the economy', the way things are working now, or how they could be better. And we needed to do more than take their temperature: we needed a story that moved them, and the language to tell it.

We *did* know that what was challenging to achieve alone, was possible through coming together – to learn, reinforce and back each other in, with a common story told from a chorus of perspectives.

So after a period of studying, sharing and comparing notes, we embarked on this new research. We conducted rigorous focus groups, and dial-tested new messages.

This guide brings together the best of this journey so far: winning messages and insights from our research, foundational guidelines you can apply to any issue, and specific tips for talking about tax and budgets, welfare, aid, insecure work and more. **It is not the final word on any of these topics of course, but a summary of the best of what we've learned so far.** We hope it will be of use to the vast range of campaigners, experts and communications professionals working to create a world that values what money can't buy. And we're confident it serves as an invaluable resource for future research to carry our story forward.

We can move the needle of what's considered possible, and create the space for the leadership, priorities and outcomes we want instead of defending against the worst of what we oppose.

If you'd like to learn more about this project or how you can get involved, please contact Bec Wilson at info@australianprogress.org.au

The research process

This guide has been heavily informed by research conducted for Australian Progress and our partners by Tim Chapman of The Bluestone Agency, in partnership with John Armitage of QDOS Research and Troy Burton of Reveille Strategy.

Anat Shenker-Osorio of ASO Communications acted in a limited advisory capacity, and it is her methodology we applied crafting this research.

In researching this guide we conducted a series of focus groups and a dial test. We clustered dial test participants, through detailed analysis of multiple questions, into three segments:

SUPPORTER BASE



Those who already agree with progressive economic policies.

They make up 15% of the dial test sample.

STEADFAST OPPONENTS



Those opposed to our policies and who are very unlikely to change their minds when we use a different message (note: no connection to the political party meaning of 'opposition').

11% of the dial test sample.

PERSUADABLES



The bulk of the population whose views are not strongly held and whose opinion can be affected by how a policy is talked about or framed.

74% of the dial test sample.

In addition 60 **advocates**, staff and key volunteers from our organisations, participated as a separate sample in the dial test. We did this both to understand how our own advocates' views compared to other groups, and to ensure we came away with messages that advocates would themselves spread to the support base.

Under this methodology, the aim is to craft a message that advocates will carry, which will energise our supporter base, convince those open to persuasion, and alienate those steadfast opponents who will never change their minds.

As Anat Shenker Osorio explains, doing this achieves three things:

"First, we empower our choir to want to convince the congregation. Second, we argue on our terms – not those of our opposition. If our committed opposition registers disapproval at our words, we can rest assured we're advancing our ideas, not merely saying something blandly inoffensive. And, finally, we can make our opponents appear like the outliers they are: out of touch with what the vast majority believe and desire."¹

¹ 'Messaging this Moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators,' Anat Shenker-Osorio.

Desk research

We started by compiling and analysing previous research commissioned by partner organisations, as well as conducting our own language analysis of key economic debates. This informed an early draft guide with proposed wording shifts on specific issues. This work informed the hypotheses which we set out to more rigorously test.

Focus groups

We held eight focus groups in locations including Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne and Parramatta between November 2017 and January 2018. The focus groups were designed to gain qualitative insight into the underlying reasoning of Australians on the economy and the current state of affairs; plus gain some initial feedback on various narratives. All groups contained a mix of males and females and a range of ages. Pre-sorting participants based on their response to a range of questions, we held four groups with our support base; three with persuadables and one with steadfast opponents.

Dial tests

In February 2018 we conducted an online dial test with a representative sample of 1,500 Australian voters.

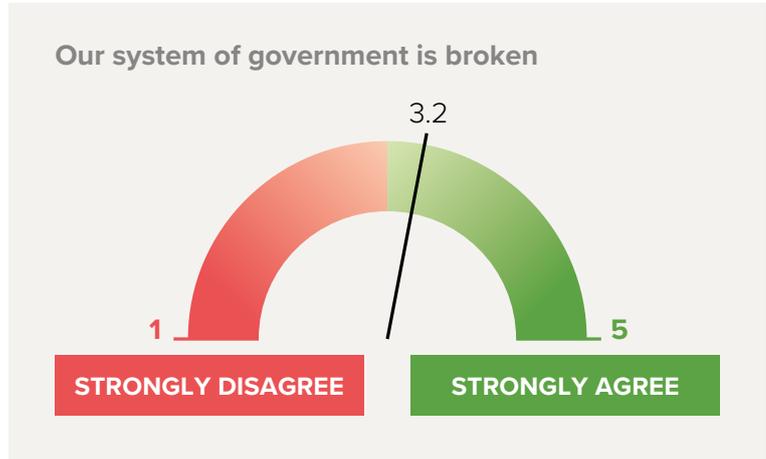
We tested five messages of around 100 words each, moment-by-moment, to see which language was effective in communicating about our economy and society, paying particular attention to the responses of supporters and those open to persuasion.

The process went like this:

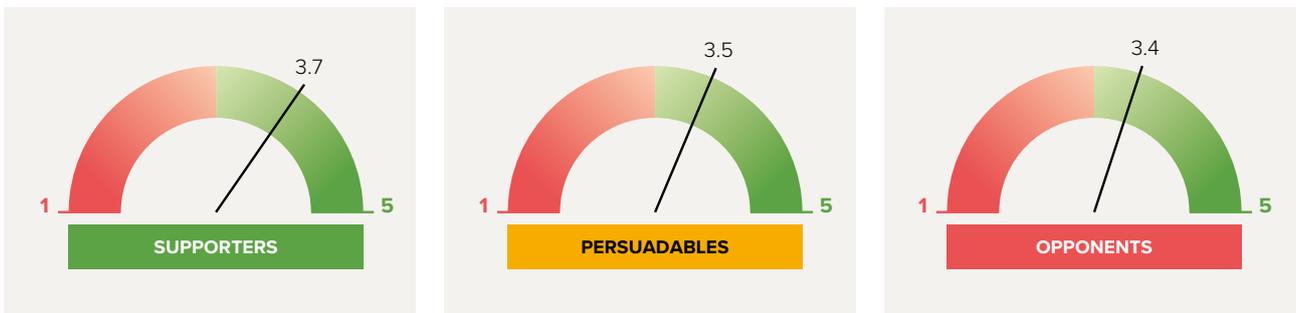
1. We tested their views and feelings on a broad range of economic and social questions and policies;
2. We explored the effect of different key words on their support for specific policy areas;
3. We played a series of 'framed' messages during which participants dialed up or down, moment by moment, to show us their response those frames and messages; and finally
4. We measured the impact of those frames by re-testing views and feelings.

Where we are: how people understand the current situation

A majority in each segment at least somewhat agree that our present system of government is broken.



Here's the result broken down by supporter base, persuadables and opponents, with supporters most likely to think the present system is failing:



PEOPLE MOSTLY SEE MONEY AS A MEANS TO AN END

People see money mostly as a means to an end. When asked to talk about the things they care about, people spontaneously talk about friendship, family, pets, going out to dinner, sport, time to think deeply about your life, helping others and having goals. They don't bring up money or the economy. Women used the word "happiness." One group of persuadables in Melbourne nominated 'health', 'well-being' and 'freedom'. They acknowledged that not having money might create limitations on what you can do.

PEOPLE BROADLY SEE THE ECONOMY AS OUT OF THEIR CONTROL

People broadly see the economy as out of their control, either as something existing in the background like the weather, as force to which they are subservient, or even a beast they need to feed. We're not saying this is something we should encourage, just insight into where people are currently, after decades living in a neoliberal reality.

A MAJORITY BELIEVE CORPORATIONS AND THE WEALTHY HAVE TOO MUCH POWER

A majority in each segment believes that corporations and the wealthy have too much power; and that everyday people who vote have too little. A majority in each segment also believe that community groups should also have more power, except for those in our 'opponent group'.

INSIGHTS INTO CURRENT ATTITUDES FROM THE RESEARCH

KEY INSIGHT:

People don't readily distinguish between *this* Government (e.g. the Turnbull Government, the Rudd Government) and *the* government. So when we focus on the failures of a particular Government, we undermine our case for a government that can address our needs, and instead reinforce the article of neoliberal faith that 'business' provides a better solution.

- Encouragingly, as compared to other countries Australians express a **very strong desire for government to provide comprehensive services when prompted with options** (especially for health, education, aged care, public transport and childcare).
- **People don't automatically connect their recognition of and distaste for corporate power with the need for more active, caring government that prioritises the needs of people and planet.** They default to perceiving government as being in cahoots with corporations, influenced by big money, part an established system that looks after itself with little regard for the rest of us. There is further narrative work to be done here, but our initial findings suggest that in terms of framing a solution, democracy is the only thing more powerful than capitalism.
- **'Making the economy better' gets interpreted as 'growing faster.'** While many people think the government could manage the economy better 'for the good of the people', **most are also sceptical that government is as capable or competent as business.**
- Unhelpfully, most people default to a narrow vision of **the role of government in the economy:** taxing and spending, or making laws to regulate businesses. In other words, the government spending money it might not have or interfering with the people who usually find the best solutions to problems. We should spend a great deal of effort increasing people's vision of government as directly doing and delivering things that improve people's days and lives.

In the dial tests, these attitudes shifted further toward government provision of services after hearing our messages about what government can and should do.

Our Opponents' Story vs Our Story

In our consumer-soaked culture we know our opponents' story even better than our own. That didn't happen by accident or overnight. The good news is, people instinctually prefer our story – or at least the fragments of it we're currently able to tell – because it's grounded in their lived experience of collective good through their families, communities and workplaces.

Here's the anatomy of both stories as we've come to understand them, and advice on how we should frame our story.

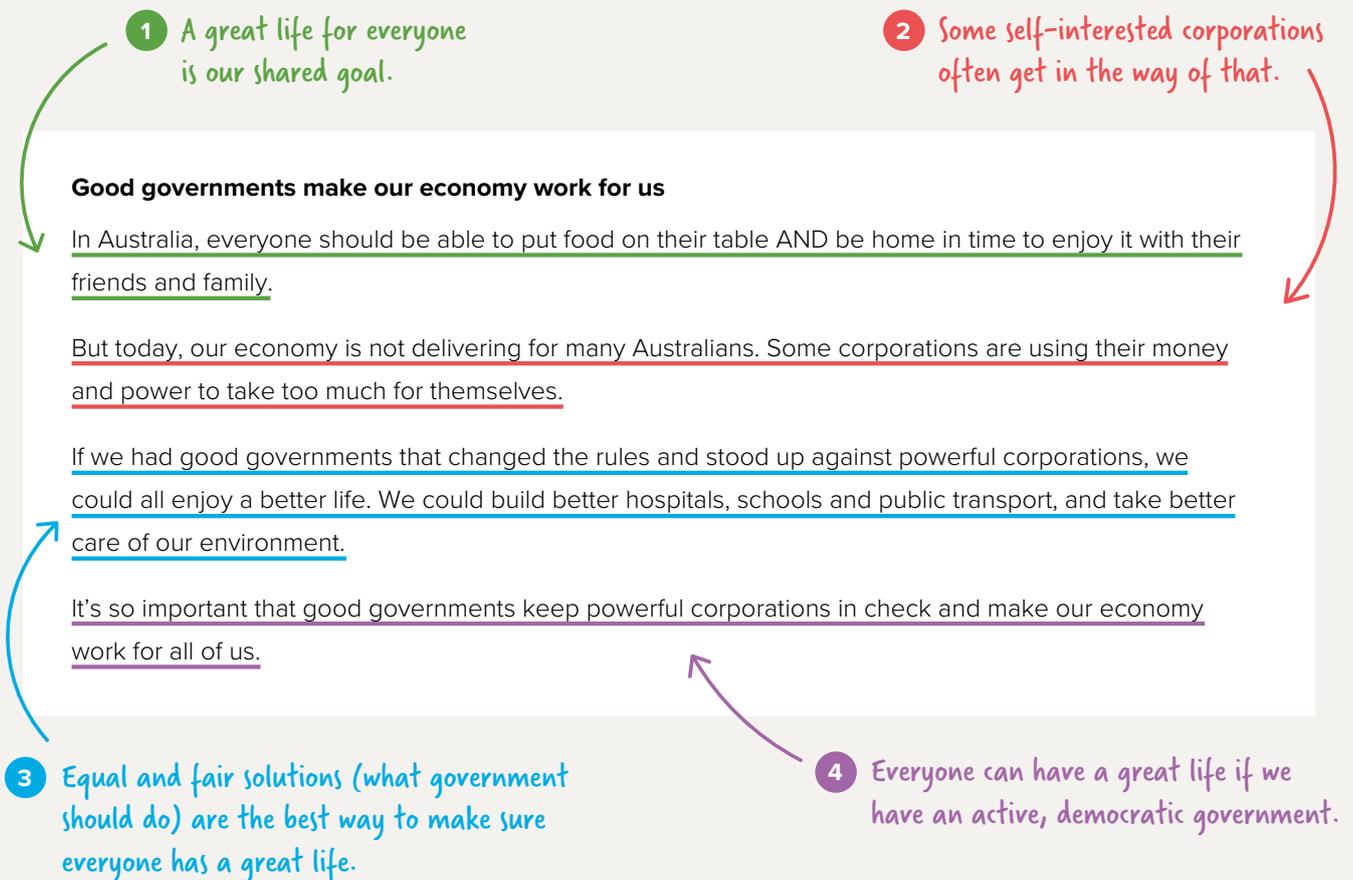
	Our Opponents' Story	Our Story
Moral	You earn what you deserve.	We're all in this together.
Values	Competition, status, hierarchy, extreme individualism couched as 'freedom', markets, money.	Cooperation, humility, equality, community, connection, equity.
Goal	Every individual has the chance to thrive by their own effort if we keep governments out of the way and let the market work its magic.	All people can live good lives in a flourishing natural environment, if empowered governments act in the public interest.
Primary metaphors	The economy as a body/natural thing not to be interfered with. People as 'human capital' or units of production to be maximised (factory/production/finance metaphors).	The economy as something human-made and maintained; a tool, machine or vehicle that can be designed and managed well or become 'out of balance', even driven off a cliff. ² People as part of nature, needing good conditions to grow and thrive (agriculture metaphors).
One-line summary message	"Raw economic growth is the measure a successful economy / government."	"We measure government and the economy by the good they create in people's lives."

² For more on this see 'Don't Buy It: The trouble with Talking Nonsense about the Economy' by Anat Shenker-Orsorio, 2012.

A new message framework that works

This is a message that weaves together strongly-supported concepts from our focus groups and dial test.

When you have time for more than a sound byte such as in speeches, op-eds and blog posts, the structure highlighted here can help better engage persuadable audiences. The more specific context you can add, the better.



Note the key elements:

1. A great life for everyone is our shared goal.
2. Some self-interested corporations often get in the way of that.
3. Equal and fair solutions (what government should do) are the best way to make sure everyone has a great life.
4. Everyone can have a great life if we have an active, democratic government.

These elements mirror the neo-liberal story our opponents have been telling:

1. A great life for everyone is our shared goal.
2. Government often gets in the way of that. (Incompetence and inefficiency)
3. Competition and choice is the best way to make sure everyone gets what they want.
4. You can get what you want if we allow the market to be free.

Narrative advice to change the story

Build up our story, don't just tear down theirs

This is probably the biggest shift for progressive communicators. We're comfortable exposing the failures of the other side. We're comfortable pointing out all the ways they're wrong, but this only frustrates their policies – their vision of the world – it doesn't realise ours. The research is in: there are better ways to engage and convince persuadable audiences.

Tim Chapman, who led our research journey, puts it this way: 'Imagine you've entered a cake-baking contest. Your job is to convince the judge to choose your cake over the others. You've got two choices: spend your energy and efforts making the best cake you can...or stand there pointing out all the flaws in the cake of the person next to you. Which approach do you think is more likely to succeed?'

We're on safe ground because people like our cake.

People believe in the concepts of collectivism. The research proves they value strong communities, caring about each other, caring for our planet and providing for the common good. They want active, empowered government because they believe it does a better job of taking into account the needs of everyone in society. People even believe in sharing the wealth, and time and again say they'd willingly pay more tax if it led to better services and outcomes for everyone.³

Our research confirms what we've all experienced - most people initially respond to negative messages. But more critically, it showed that introducing people to a positive articulation of our own story is what actually moves them in a new direction.

In fact, after hearing it, the persuadable audience moved a colossal 15 points towards preferring a more active government that 'takes into account the needs of everyone' over the efficiency of corporations.

This is a hugely encouraging. So believe in our cake. It's delicious. Be proud of it and sell it well.

The research proves that our case is more persuasive when we tell our own story, like this.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
Wealth doesn't trickle down as promised, yet we are told the lie that we must do whatever big business wants or we'll hurt the economy. Politicians need to stop acting only for wealthy elite instead of caring about everyday people.	We all deserve a fair share of the wealth our work creates. The government should protect penalty rates. They should not give a tax cut to big business. A good government can make Australia fair for everyone.



We too often make our case firmly within our oppositions' frame, like this.



VS.



³ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-26/phillips-the-tax-myths-that-cloud-our-judgement/7357358>
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/two-thirds-brits-willing-to-pay-more-tax-to-fund-nhs-poll-kings-fund-a7951361.html>

People and Planet, not Dollars and Cents

We should frame our challenge as the ‘action’ needed, not the ‘money’ needed, to attain a social or environmental goal.

Focusing on people or the planet puts them at the centre of the explanation of the problem and justification of the solution. By contrast, using money as a frame does two things: it reduces the human outcome to a \$ value; and it re-frames the question away from whether it is a worthwhile thing to do, to whether we can ‘afford’ to do it.

Think social/environmental outcomes, not financial expenditure.

If something is bad, it’s bad for people and planet; not ‘the budget’ or ‘the economy’. Where something is the right thing to do, we demonstrate that by showing how it helps people/planet. A ‘better economy’ is not our end goal. We want a better society, a healthier planet, a better life.

WHAT NOT TO DO



To save orangutans, think of them as money swinging from trees

Tourists value Indonesian and Malaysian fauna. But officials are more interested in palm pla...

ECONOMIST.COM

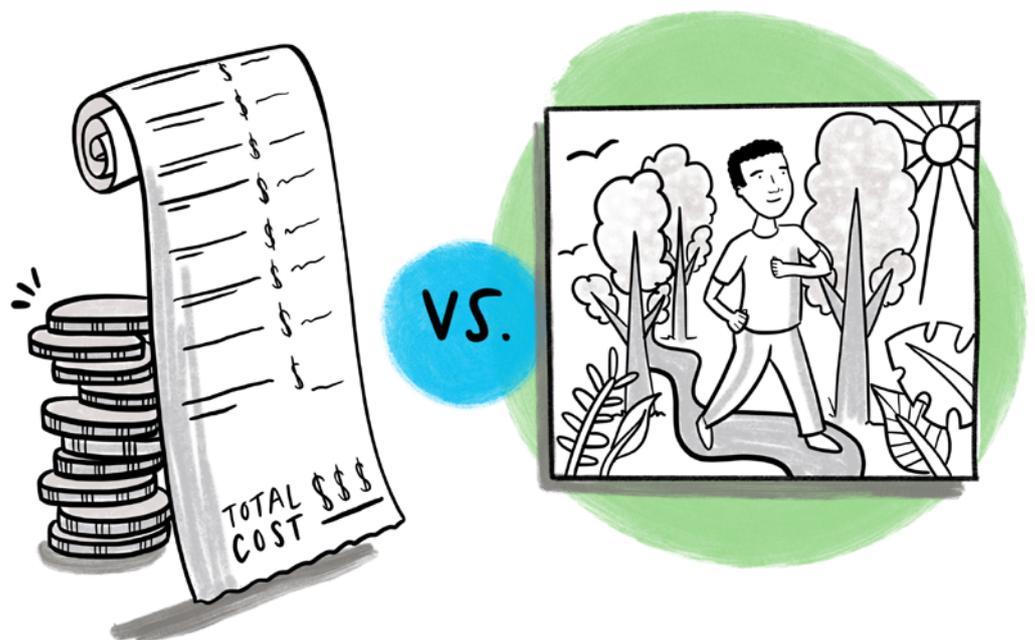
As The Australia Institute’s Richard Denniss has pointed out, if an old-growth forest is worth more in tourism than it is in paper products, sure, that’s one argument for saving it. But not a very good one. What happens tomorrow when the price of paper skyrockets?⁴

Less obviously, but still critical: don't frame your solutions in dollars to be spent on the problem. '\$X billion could end global hunger right now' actually makes the problem seem bigger and the solution further away. Again, it primes money values by discussion of dollars in relation to human life, with a distinctly transactional flavour.

Likewise, when talking about economic policies, **we should talk in terms of government activity and its outcomes, not the financing of government activities.**

Avoid 'spend', 'invest', 'borrow' – any kind of money talk. Just describe the activity and the outcome. If you want government to deliver better public transport, you want 'a quicker, more comfortable journey to work' not a 'record \$500 million investment in our rail infrastructure.' Stress **outcomes**, not dollar **output**.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
'The cost of <i>not acting</i> on climate change actually outweighs the cost of taking action.' Or 'Polluters should pay.'	We can continue to enjoy our lives in harmony with our planet and with plenty of energy if we get our energy from clean sources like the sun and wind.



Government as the Solution, not the Problem

We should say what government can and should do, not what it has failed to do. This is a major shift for many of us.

This rule fits within the broader principle that we should motivate people to action by helping them to visualise the solution, **not simply criticising the problem.**

We believe this is particularly important when it comes to encouraging people to prefer our broad narrative of **capable and caring ‘active government’** over our opponents’ narrative of a choice-rich and cost-cutting ‘free-market’.

Of course we must still speak out when political parties or politicians in government fail to deliver. **When we point out the shortcomings of political leadership, focusing on what government should do conveys what they have done wrong, in a way that encourages people to think good government can do right.**

Equally, we can **highlight the corporate lobbyists, special interests** or other actors trying to use their money to shout down community voices. Again, it’s a subtle shift but one the research tells us makes a powerful difference.

Government in general should not be framed as both the problem and the solution because it’s not overly believable and weakens faith in democracy. People often fail to discern between criticism or support for ‘this Government’ and government in general.

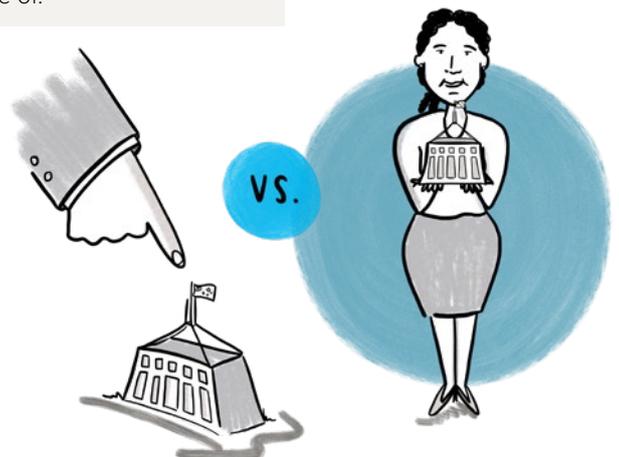
EXAMPLES

- ‘The government should do x’, not ‘the government has failed to do x’.
- If you need to criticise a program or lack of program, say ‘government can do better by doing x’, don’t convey that government can’t solve our problems.

Instead, too much corporate power is the problem:

- Corporations got too much power by undermining government, and they will attack democracy further in order to keep it.
- Show how corporations have corrupted our democratic processes, not how our democratic processes have allowed corporations to flourish.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
Government has failed to provide for the most vulnerable in our society.	The private sector has left people out in the cold (provide actual example). Government should do ‘x’ to make sure everyone in our society is taken care of.



Show don't tell (describe behaviour, don't label)

In focus groups people recoiled from generalisations and labels, whether it was 'tax cheats', 'greedy CEOs', or talking about certain corporations as 'bullies'.

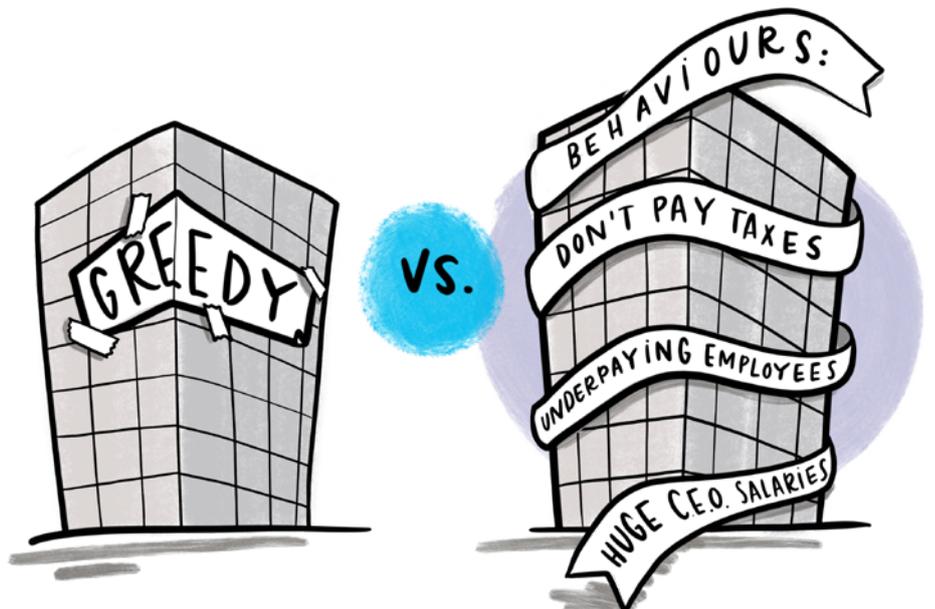
Generalisations and labels provoke scepticism and get people's defences up.

But when we describe actors' bad behaviour, such as 'haven't paid the tax they were supposed to' or 'uses money and power to shout down others' then actions are speaking for themselves, and no one's being unfairly lumped in with a group of people we've decided are the bad guys. Many organisations are uncomfortable with broad, generalised critique of corporations. We now know that we're on stronger ground simply describing their behaviour. **Let actions speak.**

Even our supporter base doesn't strongly connect corporate power with poor public services and infrastructure, so we need to connect the dots.

Until people heard messages that make the connection by describing corporate behaviour, and/or showing what government should do, more people said the private sector was better at providing services.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
<p>Greedy CEOs are to blame for stagnating wages and rising levels of inequality.</p>	<p>Some of our biggest and most profitable corporations don't pay any tax at all. If we try to make them play by the same rules as the rest of us, they run political campaigns against governments, and threaten to sack workers or increase prices.</p> <p><i>(or)</i></p> <p>Some corporations haven't paid the tax they are supposed to. They are paying huge salaries to their CEOs while underpaying the employees who help create these profits.</p>



Sell the cake, not the recipe

You walk into the store of your dreams. There it is, the shiny thing! While you admire it, the sales assistant pours over its features, the many ways it will enhance your life. By the end you don't care how much it costs, you're focused on the benefits. This is how business is done every day, and it's the opposite to how we typically communicate our arguments.

We've got to stop being so rational, fact-driven, process-focused and boring. We should all heed the advice of Anat Shenker-Osorio and **stop taking our policies out in public**. That goes doubly for jargon.

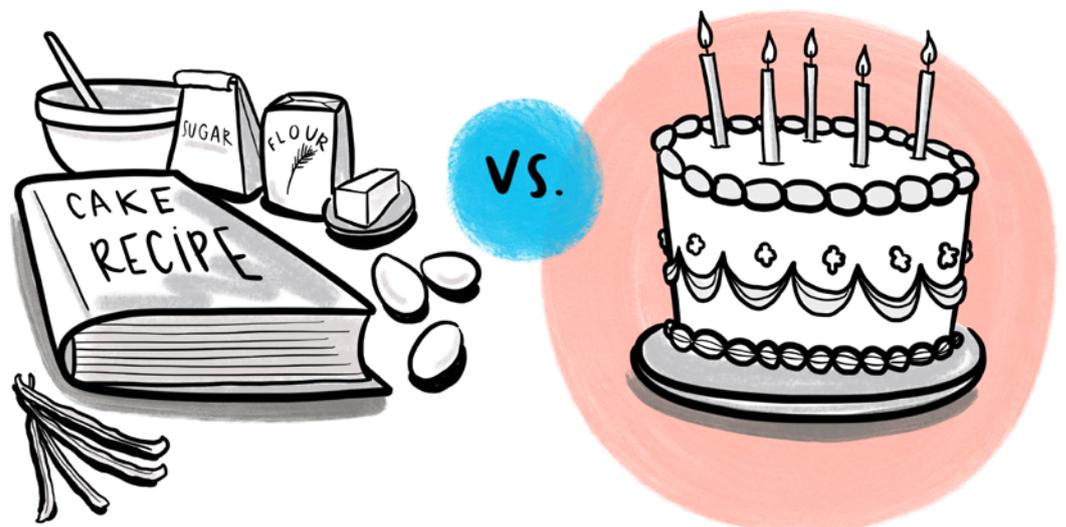
Instead of lecturing people, or trying to educate them using the process to get what we want, talk to them **about what we want and why**. What is the real goal here? What will this mean to people's lives? Lead with outcomes, not process.

- *"Increase Newstart"* is good. *"End the poverty trap"* is better.
- *Supporting "paid parental leave"* is good. *"Time for babies"* is better.

We also need to be more **specific** in our outcomes language to engage our persuadable audiences, and isolate our opposition as out of step with the community.

- *"Make corporations pay their fair share"* is open to interpretation. *"Make corporations pay more tax"* is clear.
- *"Re-balance the system"* is process-focused, and requires more context. *"Reduce corporate power"* is clear.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
We need bigger investment in early childhood education. ⁵	Every child should be able to go to preschool for free , to be nurtured, loved and taught.



⁵ For more on this, see Anat's talk at NetRoots Nation.

People Do Things

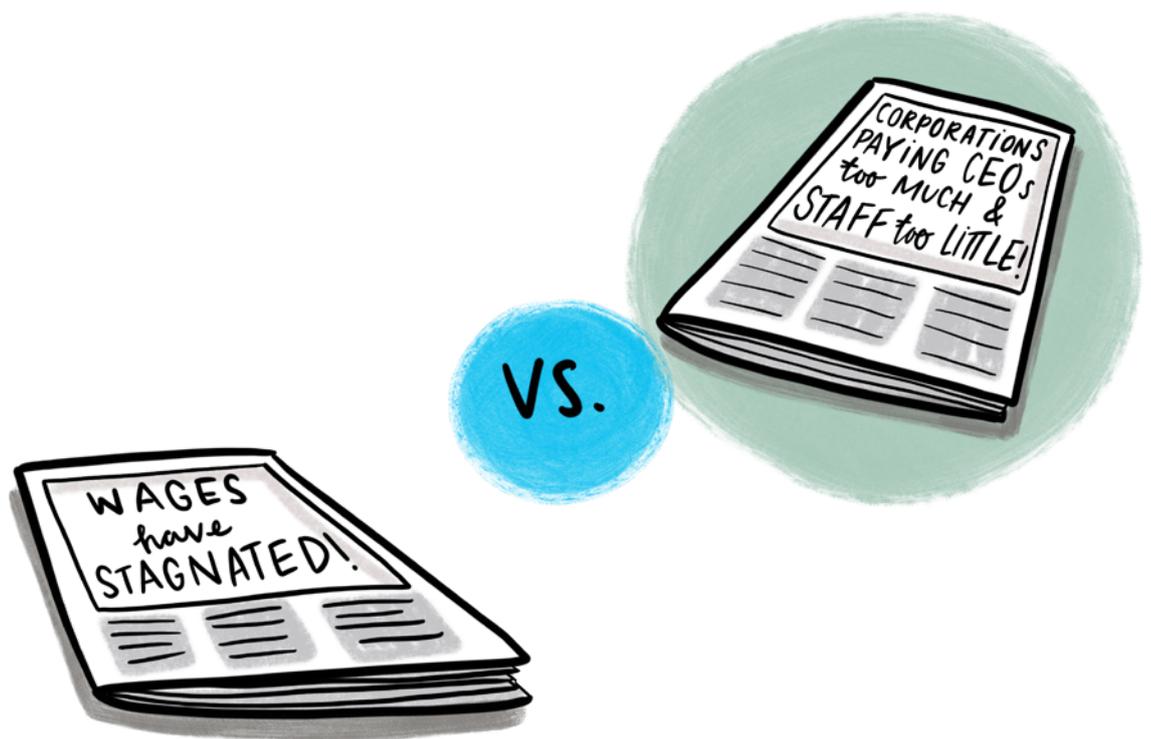
Only a human-made problem can be human-solved. When we describe problems leaving out **who's responsible, why things are the way they are**, we reinforce a sense of inevitability and powerlessness to actually change them.

Passive language is bad story-telling.

For example, avoid passive constructions like:

- 'Employees were moved onto casual contracts.'
- 'Aid projects have lost funding.'
- 'The climate is changing.' (Makes it sound like the climate is responsible.)

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
Wages have stagnated for everyday Australians.	Some corporations are paying huge salaries to their CEOs while underpaying the employees who help create these profits.



People, stories, everyday life

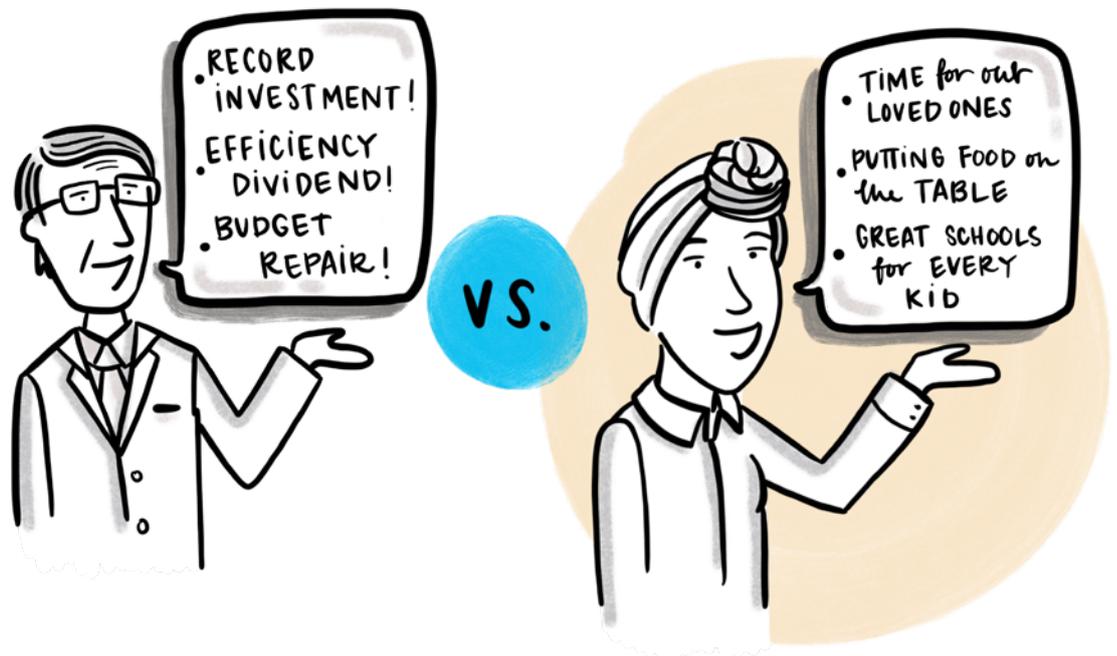
Talking in macro, abstract terms doesn't mean much compared to the need for a roof over our heads, the ability to care for the people we love, setting our children off to a good start, or jobs that pay enough to put dinner on the table.

Leave bureaucratic and impersonal language out of your public-facing communications.

Just pair it back to human, conversational language you'd actually use in everyday life. Where facts truly add something, wrap them up in stories about people (or animals, nature – whatever it is you're really talking about). Ground your points in shared life experiences and universal aspirations. Human interest is your Trojan horse.

Numbers can sometimes support your 'why', but they don't by themselves motivate people to act. Caring does.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
Rising income inequality is a threat to Australia's economic competitiveness, social cohesion, long-term productivity and sustainable living standards. Today the top 20% earn more than five times the bottom 20%.	In Australia, everyone should be able to put food on the table and be home in time to enjoy it with their family. But today, our broken system means only the wealthy enjoy life that way.

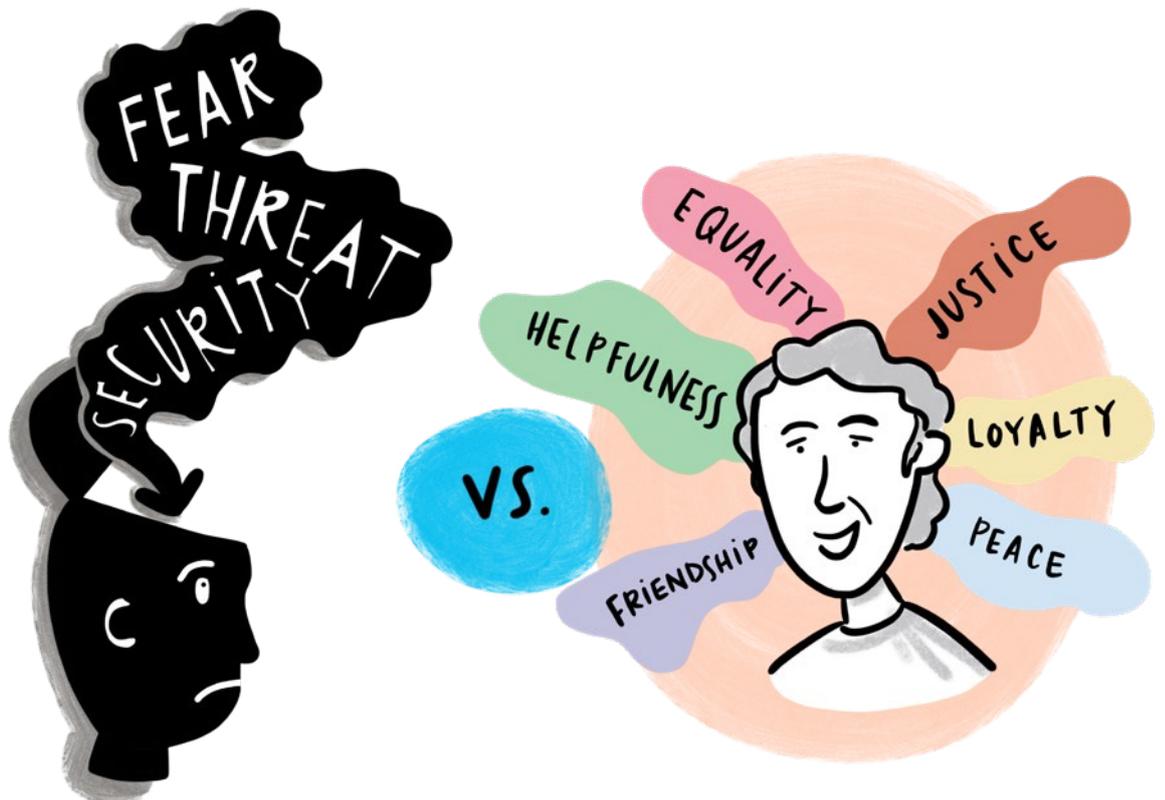


Activate the values that make your audience most receptive

Do not use selfish or self-serving arguments to try to make people more generous, noble or altruistic. Fear and security-based arguments make people want to retreat behind big walls and look after their own; they put us in a more negative mindset – and yet time and again we are asked to support foreign aid or programs for marginalised groups on the grounds that the alternative will hurt us more.

Rather than priming money/power/security values, research confirms we're actually most effective claiming the moral high ground and activating values of universalism (equality, social justice, peace, beauty, unity with nature) and benevolence (helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, loyalty, friendship).⁶

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
<p>By giving generously to foreign aid Australians benefit from increased security in our region, a decreased threat of terrorism, and potential new trading partners.</p>	<p>Most people believe that when someone needs a bit of help, it's right to lend a hand. Through the aid Australia contributes, we help people fulfill their hopes of a better future, no matter where they were born.</p>



⁶ For more on values as motivators, consider the work of Common Cause Australia.

Lead with the vision, not the problem

As advocates for justice, sustainability and fairness we tend to spend most of our time studying their opposites. When we communicate to our supporter base, we talk about 'All the Things' that are wrong. We also talk about how powerful our opponents are.

Compared to all that we can often spend very little time talking about alternatives, solutions and the power of coming together to achieve them. We then invite people to join our tribe of depressed know-it-alls and wonder why so few seem enthusiastic.

As many have pointed out, Martin Luther King's speech was called 'I have a Dream', not 'I have a Complaint'.

Human beings have a negativity bias, and the world can seem like it's going to hell even though when you look at the data, a great many things are getting better.

It's our job to show people how a better world can be achieved. Emphasise the solution twice as often as the problem.

HOW TO FRAME A VISION-CENTRIC ARGUMENT THAT ENGAGES PEOPLE

<p>Step 1. Lead with a shared value or positive vision (outcome), based on our shared values.</p>	<p>Step 2. Talk about barriers to that vision being a reality already.</p>
<p>Step 3. Talk in grounded, simple terms about solutions to overcome those barriers.</p>	<p>Step 4. Bring it back to vision/values/ what this means for people and planet.</p>

Our Message, Problem Focus	Our Message, Vision Focus
<p>Income inequality is now at its worst levels in over a generation.</p> <p>There is a widening gap between the top and bottom income earners. In terms of average income, somebody in the top 20% has around five times as much income as somebody in the bottom 20% income group.</p> <p>We need a whole-of-society approach to tackling inequality, before it further harms our economy and communities.</p>	<p>Everyone in our society should have a fair go. But our economy is not delivering for many people.</p> <p>Huge corporations have too much power. Some corporations use their money and power to shout down community needs and get their own way.</p> <p>We need good governments that keep powerful corporations in check.</p> <p>It's so important that our governments stand up for us, against the powerful corporations who operate in Australia.</p>



Make your own case, don't negate

WHAT NOT TO DO

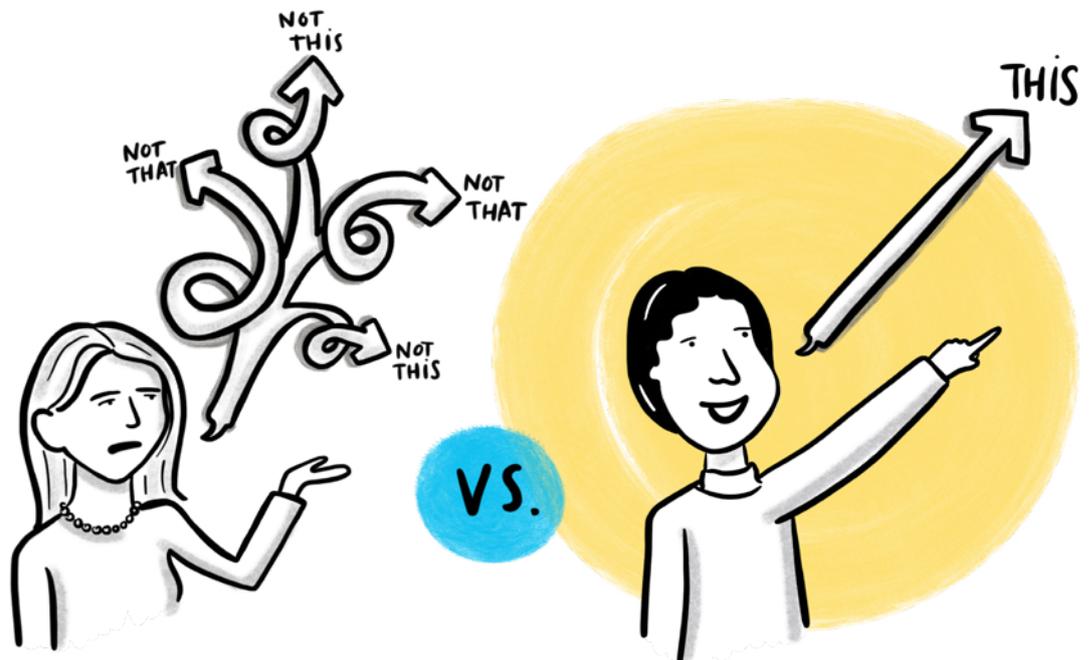
- 'Most people receiving income support are not dole bludgers.'
- 'Foreign aid does not fuel corruption.'
- 'It's a myth that all homeless people are drug or alcohol-addicted.'

The problem with these statements is that they rely solely on referencing the opponents' existing concept, which already has a foothold in our audience's minds, so often ends up being what the audience hears and remembers.

That's why 'myth-busting' usually doesn't work for the people we're really aiming for; it often ends up reinforcing the original myth. As George Lakoff says, 'facts bounce off frames'.

We're better off reframing the debate entirely than exclusively arguing in an old one. **Don't negate their messages or frames.** Instead, let our opposition argue why we *can't* have better health care, a faster commute home to our families or protect our Great Barrier Reef.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
Protecting the environment doesn't have to hurt the economy.	A successful economy serves our natural world, so we can thrive into the future.



Key Wording Shifts

Replace	Embrace
Good for... - economy - GDP - budget bottom-line - growth	Good for... - society, people, the natural world around us - a better society, a better life (Speak only about economy only as something we regulate, in service to us; a means to an end.)
Sell-off, outsource, Private	Rip-Off (as in, corporations ripping off something that belongs to us) Privatised, for-profit
Consumers, customers	Citizens, people, parents, mums and dads, students, voters, etc
Investing in, spending \$X on	Improving, growing
Tax Taxpayer money	(tax) contribution Public money/money for schools and hospitals (ie - not tax but the things tax pays for)
Welfare	Income support [name of payment] to make ends meet
Housing market	A home, homes
Flexible work	Unreliable work
The government (when being critical)	Corporations/special interests who interfere or have unfair say in politics Specific politicians (framed as being controlled by corporations)
Government has failed to do X	Government should do X (instead of Y)

How to talk about key issues

How to talk about Tax and the Budget

The key advice here is to frame **budgets as choices to do things**, not items on a balance sheet.

Tax likewise is a means to an end: it's about **public money for the services and society we all want**; not 'my money' and who's paying less vs who's paying more.

Avoid all language that implies tax is bad, a burden or some form of punishment.



CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE (OPEN WITH SHARED VALUES/ VISION)

- Everyone in Australia contributes taxes so we can have the country we want. People want great healthcare, education, public transport and clean air for everyone. It's so important that we have caring and responsible governments that deliver for us.
- A truly successful budget is measured by the good in people's lives, not numbers on a balance sheet.
- Budgets are choices to do things or not to do them.
- A strong social safety net and great public services are the bedrock of equality and opportunity for all. They're exactly what taxes are supposed to pay for, and what budgets should prioritise.



SHOW HOW YOUR OPPONENTS DIFFER (BARRIERS, DESCRIBING BEHAVIOUR)

- More than one in three of the largest companies operating in Australia are still not contributing one cent in company tax.⁷
- Letting large corporations contribute even less tax is taking public money from where it's truly needed.
- In Australia, we all contribute according to our means. Huge corporations shouldn't have a different set of rules to play by in order to cheat our communities.

⁷ No tax payable for large Australian and foreign companies, The Australian, 8 December, 2017. (Note ABC puts the number at 1 in 5 largest companies not paying tax.)



LEAD (WITH SOLUTIONS)

- It's time to change the rules to make the system fairer for everyone by [doing X].
- Corporations should pay more tax/pay the tax they're supposed to pay.
- Governments should ensure corporations contribute back to the society they live in.
- We need good governments that keep powerful corporations in check, and deliver the things everyday people care about most.

Replace	Embrace
Taxes, your money, taxpayers' money, tax burden	Contribution, corporations paying what they're supposed to, their fair share Building schools and hospitals Hospitals, schools, train lines, teachers, the education children get, the care patients receive
Budget deficit, budget repair	Revenue hole; ensure corporations pay what they should
A balanced budget	A successful budget (measured by the good in people's lives) A good budget A moral budget
Tax relief, tax breaks	Contributing (even) less, tax reduction (If positive then) 'a fairer outcome for...'
Good for the budget/the economy	Good for society, good for people, good for our lives, good for our natural world
Tax avoidance, tax dodging (you only want to avoid/dodge things that are bad), tax haven (a haven is a good thing)	Not paying what they should, reneging, withholding, short-changing our communities, tax theft, tax scheming

How to talk about Welfare and Inequality

Research from a variety of sources finds people get that inequality exists and that it's a problem. What they struggle to articulate is how it got this way and how it can be rectified. So when right-wing populism blames immigrants, why not?

Instead, talk about wealthy interests and corporations shouting down the needs of others in our community. Frame active government as the solution instead of focusing on 'government neglect.'

Speak to the reasons people are vulnerable, instead of labeling them. Use terms like 'you and I,' 'all of us,' 'people we care about' to avoid 'othering'. Remember to frame goals in terms of outcomes ('no family living in poverty'), not process ('raise the rate of Newstart').



CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE (SHARED VALUES/ VISION)

- No one in Australia should be forced to live in poverty. In good times and in hard times, we should all have the dignity and security of a roof over our head, food on the table and the essential things we need.
- Most of us seek to treat others the way we want to be treated. It's so important that our governments serve us, including everyday people doing it tough.



SHOW HOW YOUR OPPONENTS DIFFER (BARRIERS, DESCRIBING BEHAVIOUR)

- When corporations choose to hoard profits for their CEOs, but don't pay their employees more, they steer our society in the wrong direction/tip the balance of our economy in the wrong direction.
- When families have to choose between rent and food, when people lose their job, get sick and can't keep a roof over their heads, we are seeing the failures of market capitalism.
- When corporations are taking in record profits, but there hasn't been a real increase in income support for a generation, and more and more people can't make ends meet, our society is out of balance.



LEAD (WITH SOLUTIONS)

- We need an economy/society that benefits everyone, not just the already wealthy. We need reliable jobs that pay enough to keep up with the cost of living and sustain a family. And we need a social safety net strong enough to keep families out of poverty when they're struggling to make ends meet.
- We need government intervention to end the poverty trap and ensure that when people fall on hard times they still have enough to meet their basic needs.
- It's so important to have a strong, hands-on government that knows where it's going.
- A strong, hands-on government stands up to powerful corporations and ensures everyone can lead a good life.

Replace	Embrace
Vulnerable people, the marginalised, needy, the poor	People living on the brink; struggling for the basics/to make ends meet/get ahead/put food on the table, people with disabilities etc
People on welfare, on the dole, dole bludgers, welfare recipients, the unemployed, long-term unemployed	People/those of us receiving income support; People receiving (specific payment name) to make ends meet; People locked out of paid work, looking for paid work
Welfare, the dole, benefits, entitlements	Income support, social safety net, social security support for our elderly/single parent families/new parents with a disability etc
The top; the bottom Working poor, low-income	The wealthiest; the poorest Those with the most; those with the least People on the highest incomes; People on the lowest incomes Paid the least; paid the lowest incomes
Inequality Growing inequality	Economy off kilter, out of balance, Structural inequality, entrenched inequality A system out of balance, Rules that favour the wealthy
Falling on hard times, falling behind	A broken system that leaves people behind Locked out; market failure; systemic failure
'Measures' or 'cuts'	Savage cuts, vicious cuts, pushing people into poverty; Poverty measures, poverty-level payments, Poverty traps

How to talk about Unreliable Work and Pay Cuts

Here we're up against a sense of inevitability: a sense that 'uber-isation' is the future of work, we can't go back to the past.

All the more important to lead from values, stress barriers in terms of corporate behaviour, and solutions as positive government action.

It's also important to **frame profits as something employees generate** through their labour, not something the boss hands down from on high.



CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE (SHARED VALUES/ VISION)

- In Australia, everyone should be able to put food on their table and be home in time to enjoy it with their family.
- Some things, like a living wage and some ability to plan your life, are fundamental to a fair job and a good life. Any business that wants to operate in Australia needs to play by our rules and uphold community standards.



SHOW HOW YOUR OPPONENTS DIFFER (BARRIERS, DESCRIBING BEHAVIOUR)

- Today, our economy is not delivering for many of us. Corporations are hoarding more and more of the profits that their employees create. Wages are flatlining while CEO salaries and bonuses are at record highs.
- When corporations talk about flexible work arrangements, it shouldn't mean forcing people to work one or more unreliable jobs as they scramble to make ends meet.
- Corporations forcing through weekend pay cuts amounts to stealing food off the family table.



LEAD (WITH SOLUTIONS)

- We need strong, caring government to stand up to powerful corporations and ensure we pay people properly for giving up family time on the weekends or late at night.
- We need good government to change the rules and stand up to powerful corporations, so we can continue to ensure everyone has the right to a good life and fair treatment at work.

Replace	Embrace
Workers (implies work as having primacy in people's lives, ruling right over the rest of their identity)	People at work, People who work
Companies, businesses	Corporations (in general when stressing powerful players doing bad stuff)
Casual employees	Casualised staff, casually contracted
Flexible work arrangements	Casualised, precarious, unreliable, insecure work
Permanent jobs	Jobs you can count on; reliable and rewarding jobs; jobs you can commit to
X earn less than Y or receive worse conditions	X are paid less than Y, X are treated like second-class employees
Increase minimum wage, adequate wage	Pay people a living wage, pay people properly, increase wages to keep up with cost of living, pay people wages you can sustain a family on

How to talk about Privatised vs Public services

Research from a variety of sources finds people already understand - and hate - privatisation.

We don't need to re-prosecute why it's bad: in this, or that, case. Instead we need to shift the frame to reversing privatisation, 'growing' public services.

Avoid talking about the public service as an asset (money frame) or 'the family silver.' Stick to values and outcomes for people.

In our own research all segments support government-run, (full and equal access) as the best way to provide health, education, aged care and public transport. Childcare comes in closely behind.

But, people also default easily to the idea that government would do a worse job than corporations in delivering services. **People responded best in our research to a positive message of governments taking into account the needs of everyone in society.**



CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE (SHARED VALUES/ VISION)

- We want the best [hospitals, medicare, libraries, TAFES, schools, vocational training, childcare] – that put our wellbeing before corporate profits.
- We want the best [hospitals, medicare, libraries, TAFES, schools, vocational training, childcare] – not the most profitable.
- X is better when delivered by government because they can take into account the needs of everyone in society.



SHOW HOW YOUR OPPONENTS DIFFER (BARRIERS, DESCRIBING BEHAVIOUR)

- When private corporations take over, they run our services to extract the most profit possible. They do that by charging us more, providing with us less, and often treating the people who work there badly, if they get to keep their jobs at all.
- These things are too important to leave to profit-motivated corporations.
- Corporations gets to contribute to our country. They do not get to own it, or insert a profit motive where none belongs.



LEAD (WITH SOLUTIONS)

- We need to grow our public [hospitals/schools/transport etc].
- We want X that's owned by, and accountable to, the community.
- When XXX is owned and run to serve everyone in our community, we get to ensure it delivers for the public good, not private profits.

Replace	Embrace
Sell-off, outsource, selling assets	Rip-Off (as in, corporations ripping off something that belongs to us)
Private/private company	Privatised, profit-driven, corporate for-profit, profit motive; eg 'Privatised Medicare'; 'Privatised borders'
'Selling the family silver', 'plucking the golden goose' (money frame, assets to be sold)	Corporations getting their own way/swooping in
Profitable, efficient (money frame)	Important, critical, essential, foundational
Giving consumers a choice	Ripping the community off Inserting a profit motive (emphasis on corporate behaviour)
Consumers, customers	People, voters, patients, students, parents etc

How to talk about making sure everyone has a home

For all the headlines this topic generates, there's little public campaigning and so far the language from advocates can be bureaucratic and policy-centric.

Avoid market/finance frames of winners and losers. Avoid 'vulnerable people'. Avoid framing as 'welfare': **bring everything back to the simple universal need and right, home as the foundation of our lives.**



CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE (SHARED VALUES/ VISION)

- We all need a home and Australia's are some of the least affordable in the entire world.
- Home is the foundation for our lives. None of us can go about our lives, raise a family, go to work or stay healthy without a stable and safe place to call home.



SHOW HOW YOUR OPPONENTS DIFFER (BARRIERS, DESCRIBING BEHAVIOUR)

- Right now the rules let wealthier people claim tax deductions on their second, third and tenth houses, while generations are locked out of ever owning a home, and millions struggle to keep up with skyrocketing prices.
- When older women are the the fastest growing group of people experiencing homelessness in Australia, we are fundamentally on the wrong track.
- Generations of Australians did not suddenly become lazier or less able to save. The rules changed.



LEAD (WITH SOLUTIONS)

- A hands-on government can fix the broken system: to make things fairer for young families trying to buy their first home, as well as those being pushed into poverty, homelessness, and the constant stress of handing over most of their income just to keep a roof over their heads.
- Government intervention can provide better protections for those of us who rent, to make homes more affordable, accessible and permanent.
- Caring and responsible government must ensure women and families fleeing violence have a truly safe place to go, for as long as they need it.
- A competent and caring government can change the rules to ensure everyone can have a home into their old age.

Replace	Embrace
Renters	People (like us) who rent
'The homeless'	People bouncing from friend's couch to car to shelter People sleeping rough People experiencing homelessness Families without a secure place to call home
Investors	Landlords Wealthier people
The housing market/housing	A home, homes

How to talk about Aid

Frame aid as a partnership, not a one-way act of charity. Do not talk in dollars to be spent or a percentage of the budget to commit to aid. Avoid financial or security-based language that primes extrinsic values and makes people feel more selfish or afraid.

Research has found that talking up ‘Australia’s aid’ primes a nationalistic mindset, and isn’t as effective as priming universal values of people caring about people.



CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE (SHARED VALUES/ VISION)

- No matter where we’re born, people all over the world share the same hopes and dreams for the future – a safe home, a healthy life, the chance to do worthwhile work and be there for friends and family.
- Most people believe that when someone needs a bit of help, it’s right to lend a hand. Through the aid Australia contributes, we help people fulfill their hopes of a better future, no matter where they live.
- A child born in Uganda or East Timor deserves the same chance to grow up and thrive as a child born in Sydney or Melbourne.



SHOW HOW YOUR OPPONENTS DIFFER (BARRIERS, DESCRIBING BEHAVIOUR)

- If we want more kids in school and fewer babies dying of preventable diseases [or X,Y,Z tangible things] then our government needs to do more, not less.
- When corporations feel entitled to billion-dollar tax cuts, but Australia is contributing less aid than it has in three generations, things are desperately out of balance.



LEAD (WITH SOLUTIONS)

- When we work together to break the cycle of poverty and inequality, the contribution Australia makes empowers women, men and children around the world to take control and turn their lives around.
- Together we can do amazing things: train more healthcare workers in Papua New Guinea, enroll thousands of girls in schools across Afghanistan and support farmers to grow more food in sub-Saharan Africa.⁸ Let’s keep it up, and do more, not less.
- Our government can help ensure a child born in East Timor or Uganda has the same chance at a good life as a child growing up in Sydney or Melbourne.

⁸ All real-life examples of the aid Australia contributes in action, taken from DFAT website.

Replace	Embrace
Australian/Foreign Aid	Aid, Contribution (Australia makes)
Australian Government/taxpayers' money	People (who've contributed)
Generous Australians	Caring/determined people
Poor/vulnerable people, marginalised people, aid recipients	People in poor parts of the world, people working hard to...

Where to from here

So far in our story we've landed on some good language to describe for people the 'problem': corporations having too much power and influence; as well as good language to describe our 'solution': more active, caring government prioritising the needs of people and planet.

But we know people don't automatically connect the two ideas. We need a bridge, and that's the key place where there's more narrative work to be done.

Our initial findings suggest, very encouragingly, that democracy is that bridge: the one idea strong enough to take on capitalism, and the influence of Big Money in our politics and society.

From John Armitage's report on the focus groups:

"If the question is, 'Can an Australian Government constrain corporate predation on the people?' we might get a 'maybe' at best. The corporates are seen as very powerful.

And, if the question is, 'Will an Australian Government constrain corporate predation on the people?' it is even worse. The Government is in cahoots with the corporates after all.

But, if the question is, 'In this country, if the people pretty much all want the same thing, can we change the way the system works?' we may well do a lot better. We would be evoking the one western idea that is even bigger than capitalism. Democracy."

For testing in Parramatta, these ideas were put into bite-sized chunks of homespun logic.

“ In this country democracy rules. It is the people who get the final say.

We all want a quality health system for everyone. We all want every child to have access to a good quality public school. We all want the elderly to be properly cared for. We all want the corporations to stop squirming out of doing their fair share. We all want people at work to be able to put food on the table and get home in time to eat it with their loved ones. These are our rights.

So let's stop mucking around and just do it.”

While there was some disagreement on whether the term 'rights' was appropriate and the extent to which government could affect change, **the overall response was overwhelmingly positive.**

There is clearly strong potential here, which builds on our key advice to focus our messages on what active, empowered government can and should do.

Next Steps

This research project answers some questions and raises more. There is more work to do on attitudes and language around jobs and welfare, and crucially the interrelationship of a strong society with a strong democracy.

We're also excited to test more specific language on tax, aid, housing and other issues.

Australian Progress is seeking more partners to drive forward this project and commission further research on these and other issues. To get involved, contact Bec Wilson at info@australianprogress.org.au

Project Partners

Civil society partners in this project include the Community and Public Sector Union, GetUp, the Uniting Church, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the Australian Council for Social Services, the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association and United Voice. We encourage you to join us.

Research Partners

Tim Chapman of The BlueStone Agency led this research project, in partnership with John Armitage of QDOS Research and Troy Burton of Reveille Strategy. Anat Shenker-Osorio of ASO Communications lent her valued research methodology, expertise and guidance.



Report design by Tim Allan of Made Visual and illustrations by Devon Bunce of Digital Storytellers.

Recommended Reading

REPORTS

Framing the Economy: How to Win the Case for a Better System, by NEON, NEF, Frameworks Institute and PIRC (UK), 2018. <http://neweconomics.org/2018/02/framing-the-economy-2/>

Messaging this Moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators, by Anat Shenker-Osorio for the Centre for Community Change (US), 2017.

BOOKS

Don't Buy It: The trouble with Talking Nonsense about the Economy, by Anat Shenker-Osorio, 2012.

Econobabble: How to Decode Political Spin and Economic Nonsense, by Richard Denniss, 2016.

Our team works on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and of the Kulin people of the Eora Nation. We pay respect to their Elders — past, present and future — and acknowledge the important role all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to play within Australia.

This guide represents the views of the author and research conducted for Australian Progress only. It should not be construed to represent the views of partner organisations.

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