

How to talk about economics

Australian Progress brought together leading civil society organisations interested in changing the story on the economy: finding persuasive ways to champion the issues we care about – from reliable jobs to a strong social safety net, affordable housing, quality healthcare and a thriving natural world.

This short “cheat sheet” is a summary of the best of what we’ve found so far. A full messaging guide, and the detailed research results, are available online at australianprogress.org.au.

Research Methodology

We held eight focus groups in Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney for qualitative insight and initial narrative feedback, and conducted online dial testing with a representative sample of 1500 Australians. We clustered participants into these four segments for analysis:

Advocates — a separate sample in the dial testing of over 60 people from across our organisations.

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’ or party politics).

Support base — those who already agree with progressive economic policies.

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

We dial-tested five messages measuring for language that enthused advocates, engaged the support base, moved the persuadables and alienated the steadfast opponents.

Sample message, and recommended structure

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

For longer messages – speeches, op-eds, blog posts, – the structure

highlighted here can help to ensure your message leaves your audience with your intended meaning. The more specific context – like which rules governments should change – you can add, the better.

1 A great life for everyone is our shared goal.

2 Some self-interested corporations often get in the way of that.

Good governments make our economy work for us

In Australia, everyone should be able to put food on their table AND be home in time to enjoy it with their friends and family.

But today, our economy is not delivering for many Australians. Some corporations are using their money and power to take too much for themselves.

If we had good governments that changed the rules and stood up against powerful corporations, we could all enjoy a better life. We could build better hospitals, schools and public transport, and take better care of our environment.

It's so important that good governments keep powerful corporations in check and make our economy work for all of us.

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.

Lessons from the Research

TELL OUR OWN STORY TO WIN

Most people believe in collectivism over individualism. Our research shows that they like strong communities more than a strong market, care more about each other than money, and care deeply for our planet and the common good. They believe in active, empowered government because they believe it does a better job of taking into account everyone's needs.

Unfortunately, we found they also believe the neoliberal story about finite government funding and efficiency of the private sector. **Telling people**

that our opponents are wrong is no longer enough and distracts from transformative change we want.

When we focus on our own story, people like the idea of government doing things for everyone more than individual choice, and they like the upside of their lives improving more than they worry about where the 'money comes from.' **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

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 the wealthy elite instead of caring about everyday people.

Our Message, Our Frame

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. It's time to change the rules to make Australia fair for everyone.

TALK ABOUT PEOPLE AND PLANET, NOT DOLLARS AND CENTS

Our research found that people often default to a 'financial frame' when thinking about the economy – they talk about money. However, if we instead talk about the things people make and use, or the places they live and love, they then focus on the **outcomes for people and planet – which they value more than money.**

Describing things in terms of money does two things: it reduces the human outcome to a dollar value; and re-frames from whether they are worthwhile to whether we can 'afford'

them. **We know from this research, as well as previous research in Australia and internationally, that mentioning the money turns a persuadable audience away from our proposals.**

If you want government to deliver better public transport, people will benefit from 'a quicker, more comfortable journey to work' not a 'record \$500 million investment in our rail infrastructure.' Stress **outcomes for people, NOT dollar output.** Avoid 'spend,' 'invest,' 'borrow,' 'afford' or any kind of money talk.

Our Message, Their Frame

'The cost of *not acting* on climate change actually outweighs the cost of taking action.' Or 'Polluters should pay.'

Our Message, Our Frame

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.

SAY WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN AND SHOULD DO

The research shows that when most people hear criticism of ‘the government’ or even politicians, they understand it as ‘our system of democratic government isn’t working.’ They are left to conclude that private corporations are the viable option for getting something done.

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.

The research is clear: when we tell the story this way, people prefer **‘competent and caring government’** to solve their problems over the ‘efficient, choice-rich and cheap’ private sector. When criticising a government policy, program or project, or lack thereof, say **‘government can/should do x,’** not ‘government has failed or sold-out by doing y.’

Our Message, Their Frame

Government has failed to provide for the most vulnerable in our society.

Our Message, Our Frame

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.

TALK ABOUT CORPORATIONS AS THE PROBLEM BY SPECIFYING THEIR BAD BEHAVIOUR

Our research shows people are angry with, or at least distrust and dislike corporations. However in focus groups and dial tests people, including our support base, recoiled from generalisations and labels like ‘tax cheats,’ ‘greedy CEOs,’ or ‘bullies.’

When we describe specific corporate bad behaviour – such as **‘haven’t paid the tax they are supposed to’** or **‘use money and power to shout down others’** – those actions speak for themselves. People who hear about those actions are more likely to agree

with proposals to reduce corporate power or increase government regulation and services.

Even our support 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 specifically make the connection by describing corporate behaviour, and showing what government should do, more people said the private sector was better at providing services.

Our Message, Their Frame

Greedy CEOs are to blame for stagnating wages and rising levels of inequality.

Our Message, Our Frame

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.
(or)

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.

Little changes to make a big difference

Talk cake, not recipe: Instead of trying to educate people about the process to get something, **show them what they get.** For example, “Every child should be able to go to preschool for free, to be nurtured, loved and taught.” Not, “We need a bigger investment in early childhood education.”

People (and corporations) do things: Only a human-made problem can be human-solved. For example, say, “Corporations have kept more profits for themselves and refused to put in their fair share to our community.” Not, “Wages have stagnated and inequality has increased.”

People, stories, everyday life: Macro, abstract terms, including words like “fair” are open to interpretation without specific context. For example: 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 and still be home in time to enjoy it with our families.

Key Wording Shifts

Replace	Embrace
Good for... - budget - GDP - budget bottom-line	Good for... - society, people, the natural world around us - a better society, a better life
Sell-off, outsource, private	Rip-off Privatised, for-profit
Consumers, customers	Citizens, people, parents, Australians, mums and dads, students, voters, [avoid ‘citizens’ or ‘Australians’ if talking immigration or welfare]
Investing in, spending \$X on	Growing, building, delivering, creating, making, providing [specific outcome]
Tax, Taxpayer money Taxation	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
Welfare	Income support [name of payment] to make ends meet
Housing market Affordable housing	A home, homes
Flexible work	Unreliable, insecure 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)

Next Steps

This initial research project answers some questions and raises more. There is more work to do on attitudes and language around jobs and welfare, and the interrelationship of a strong economy 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 Community and Public Sector Union, GetUp, Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the Australian Council for Social Services and the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association.

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.

