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Social psychology, war and peace:  
Towards a critical discursive peace psychology.

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### Abstract

In this paper I make two related arguments: that peace psychology and social psychological peace research should give greater attention to discourse, and that critical discursive approaches in social psychology should explore matters of international military conflict, an area which has hitherto been somewhat neglected in this tradition of work. These arguments are developed in relation to debates concerning the nature and status of psychological 'science', and the neglect of language in social and peace psychology. To illustrate the possibilities of a critical discursive approach, research on the discursive function of 'peace' is discussed. In conclusion, it is suggested that a critical discursive perspective enables analysts to interrogate a range of assumptions underpinning militaristic ideologies.

Social psychology, war and peace: Towards a critical discursive peace psychology.

It has recently been argued that the fields of social psychology and peace psychology have much to offer one another (see e.g. Cohrs & Boehnke, 2008; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2008). Vollhardt and Bilali (2008) have sought to outline areas of substantial overlap between the two sub-disciplines, delineating a field of research which they term social psychological peace research (SPPR). They point out that core social psychological concepts such as social identity and intergroup relations, prejudice and contact, social dominance and stereotypes are all of direct relevance to the study of peace and conflict, and that peace psychology might draw more systematically on the theoretical frameworks developed in social psychology. Similarly, they point to the use of a broader array of methodological approaches in peace psychology than in social psychology, and suggest that social psychology ‘could dig even deeper into its conceptual and methodological toolbox’ (p. 22) in addressing matters of peace and conflict. To develop this theme, in the present paper I want to explore some of the issues neglected by much of the work on war and peace in both sub-disciplines. In doing so, I will advocate a critical discursive approach which involves greater attention to language and ideology.

However, the flow of traffic should not all be in one direction. Whereas peace psychologists have made a point of addressing issues of international military conflict, there is relatively little critical discursive work on such matters (see Billig & MacMillan 2005; Herrerra, 2003; McKenzie, 2001, for exceptions). Critical discursive work has tended to focus on no less important matters such as racism (e.g. Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Condor, 2006; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and gender (e.g. Gough, 1998; Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995), but there

has been a curious absence of attention to matters of military conflict in critical discursive work to date. In sketching out the beginnings of a critical discursive approach to such matters, I therefore also want to argue for increased attention to issues of international war and peace in critical social psychology. It is instructive to begin this exercise with a brief overview of some relevant features of social psychology's history.

*War and the history of social psychology*

A number of authors have noted that the history of social psychology is intimately bound up with war (e.g. Richards, 2002; Rose, 1999). In particular, there is a general consensus that the discipline began to coalesce into its present form following the Second World War. For example, Reicher and Haslam (2006, p. 1) suggest that 'it is arguable that the shadow of the Holocaust lies over the last half century of social psychology', and Cartwright (1979, p. 84) has suggested that 'the one person who has had the greatest impact upon the field' is Adolf Hitler. In the years prior to the Second World War, the movement of influential researchers such as Lewin, Heider and others across the Atlantic was instrumental in the development of the discipline in the US (see e.g. Ash, 1992; Cartwright, 1979), and the Second World War also gave rise to classic studies of group dynamics such as Stouffer et al.'s (1949-1950) *The American Soldier*. Similarly, studies such as Adorno et al.'s (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, and Milgram's (1963, 1974) groundbreaking – and highly controversial – work on obedience to authority (see Blass, 2004) were a direct response to events in Nazi Germany.

War has therefore been central both to the development of the discipline, and to the sorts of questions it has addressed. Yet it is curious to note, despite the

proliferation of SPPR, that theory and research explicitly concerning military institutions and ideologies remain largely absent from much of mainstream social psychology (Gibson & Abell, 2004). Exactly why this state of affairs might have arisen is difficult to pin down, but one likely contributing factor is social psychology's pursuit of universal laws of human social behaviour and cognition, something which meant that military conflict was, by definition, only ever likely to be regarded as a specific manifestation or outcome of more general underlying processes. This approach to social psychology has been subject to various critiques over the years, with the last twenty-five years in particular seeing the development of perspectives influenced by what has been termed the 'turn to language' or 'turn to discourse' in the wider social sciences (Kroger & Wood, 1998). Much of this work has been conducted under the rubric of 'critical social psychology' (see e.g. Gough & McFadden, 2001; Hepburn, 2003; Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997; Tuffin, 2005). However, these approaches have had relatively little impact on mainstream social and peace psychology, particularly in North America, but elsewhere also. This is likely due in no small part to the fact that discursive approaches work with a different model of research, and indeed a different conceptualization of what the discipline of psychology might look like, to the normative hypothetico-deductive (post-)positivist approach which characterizes mainstream psychology.

### *Scientism and social psychology*

A number of critics of social psychology – and indeed of psychology more broadly – have suggested that the discipline suffers from an affliction of scientism – the strict adherence to the values assumed to drive forward the natural sciences, regardless of their appropriateness for social psychological phenomena (e.g. Parker,

1989; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1997). Somewhat ironically this is bound up with a range of extra-scientific concerns, such as the greater levels of public funding awarded to the sciences compared with other disciplines by many governments. Indeed, some critics now stress that alternative approaches may be *more* scientific (e.g. Harré, 2004). The adoption of a mode of inquiry designed to enable psychology to follow the course of the natural sciences has led to a focus on universal processes, with the aim of developing general laws. The present paper is not the place to go into the details of this approach, nor of the various critiques which have been directed towards it, but the way in which the territory of social psychology has been mapped out has led to some phenomena being accorded primary status, with others of seemingly no less import being neglected.

An example can be suggested by considering one of the areas of social psychology which should be most useful in addressing matters of war and peace – intergroup conflict. The concern with finding general processes of intergroup conflict has resulted in a neglect of the specifics of military conflict and the institutions and ideologies which support it. The tendency to use the term *conflict* itself draws many more varieties of non-military encounter into the purview of social psychological theorization, whilst ignoring the possibility that theories developed to explain conflict *in general* – and which therefore do not focus specifically on military conflict – may not be able to account for modern warfare. A similar problem can be suggested with respect to the focus on *intergroup* conflict. Over the last 30 years or so, the re-invigoration of social psychological work on groups has been one of the most encouraging aspects of the discipline (see e.g. Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). However, the tendency to frame all conflicts as fundamentally intergroup encounters potentially deflects attention from the way in which they can

also be construed as encounters between states, governments and their armies. All these can be conceived as social groups, but they are also potentially much *more* than social groups (Gibson & Condor, 2009).

Similarly, a range of social psychological topics have been assumed to apply to military contexts, but it is rare for social psychological research to actually focus on the military directly. To take just one example of this, it has often been suggested that Milgram's obedience research sheds light on general processes of military socialization and cohesion, as well as helping to understand processes leading to specific atrocities such as the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War (Milgram, 1974). However, despite the enormous interest in Milgram's research, there is seemingly little attempt to explore the way in which obedience operates specifically in military contexts. The reasons for this may be complex – for example, there are ethical and political dilemmas to be faced in conducting research in military settings. Crucially, researchers must ask whether their research is sufficiently critical of military institutions and militaristic ideology, or whether it is in danger of being co-opted by military institutions themselves.

Ultimately, the problem here may be no less than what type of discipline social psychology purports to be. Gergen (1973) famously argued some time ago that social psychology was more akin to a historical enterprise, with the goal of finding general laws replaced by the mapping of the shifting patterns of behaviour and commonsense ways of thinking over time. In this respect, any social psychological approach to military conflict should engage with the historical contingencies of ideology, such as the monopoly of the nation-state over the means of legitimate violence (Giddens, 1985). A social psychology capable of addressing matters of international peace and conflict may need to take Gergen's (1973) challenge seriously



in order to overcome the limits of the search for general laws. Furthermore, these concerns should not be seen as somehow localised within social psychology – peace psychology is arguably faced with a related set of problems.

*Critique in peace psychology*

As defined by the authors of the landmark text *Peace, conflict and violence: Peace psychology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, the field of peace psychology, seeks to develop theories and practices aimed at the prevention and mitigation of direct and structural violence. Framed positively, peace psychology promotes the nonviolent management of conflict and the pursuit of social justice, what we refer to as peacemaking and peacebuilding, respectively.

(Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001, p. 13)

Christie (2006, p. 1) identifies the advent of the Cold War as crucial for the development of peace psychology insofar as it signalled the beginning of ‘a period during which many psychologists broke from the tradition of supporting U.S. government policies.’ However, whilst sometimes critical of government policy, peace psychology retains many of the theoretical and methodological frameworks of mainstream psychological science, and has been largely untouched by the turn to language in the wider social sciences or the ‘critical’ movement(s) within social psychology. Where peace psychology seeks to apply psychological knowledge for the advancement of peace and social justice, critical social psychological approaches concerned with social justice issues have tended to go hand-in-hand with more wide-ranging critiques of psychology itself. We might therefore draw a (necessarily somewhat rough and ready) distinction between those endeavours (such as peace psychology) which seek to apply the tools, findings and concepts of mainstream

psychology to matters of peace, conflict and social justice, while leaving the established disciplinary frameworks of psychology in tact, and those approaches (such as a discursively-influenced critical social psychology) where critique encompasses the very nature of psychology's disciplinary apparatus itself.

One of the most important consequences of this is that peace psychology tends to perpetuate what Hewer and Taylor (2007, p. 199) have termed psychology's 'recourse to individualism'. Drawing on the longstanding critique of mainstream psychology as tending to underestimate the cultural constitution of individuality, Hewer and Taylor argue for an approach which takes seriously the social constructionist argument that reality (including psychological reality) is constructed through language. Thus, language should be placed at the centre of any genuinely critical approach to peace psychology. In this respect, discourse analytic work, which remains on the margins of social psychology, has much to offer a critical psychological approach to matters of peace and war.

### *The neglect of language*

Surveying the literature on language and peace psychology, Blumberg (2006, p. 93) has argued that 'a broad spectrum of communications research testifies to the importance of analysing discourse at all levels and in a variety of ways, in order to facilitate both peace and justice.' Blumberg reviews a range of studies addressing a wide array of peace and conflict-related subjects, yet other authors (e.g. Harper, Roberts & Sloboda, 2007) have pointed to peace psychology's general lack of attention to language use.

This discrepancy can perhaps be explained by drawing on observations made by discourse analysts in social psychology over many years. Despite the wealth of

research on language, what is missing is a *theory* of language as something other than a medium for the communication of thoughts from one mind to another (Reddy, 1979). In this respect, much work on language within peace psychology tends to adopt a relatively traditional psychological view of language. Thus rather than taking seriously the argument made by social constructionists that discourse constructs, rather than reflects, reality, peace psychology – where it has paid attention to language – can be seen to reproduce many of the individualistic and cognitivist assumptions of mainstream psychology. In contrast, an attention to social construction goes hand-in-hand with a foregrounding of the social and cultural milieu and a move away from the dominant conceptions of personhood to be found in a great deal of psychological research and theory (Hewer & Taylor, 2007).

The assumptions underlying much psychological research on war and peace can therefore broadly be understood as embodying a social cognition perspective. Such perspectives borrow heavily from cognitive psychology, and indeed the assumptions underpinning such work are outlined explicitly by Ormerod and Ball (2008, p. 554) in their thoughtful discussion of the role of qualitative methods in cognitive psychology. They argue that ‘[t]o apply qualitative methods in cognitive psychology, you have to assume that language reflects thought – otherwise, there is no cognition to study. The alternative, adopting a constructionist stance in which language becomes the object of study rather than the vehicle, is, we argue, untenable for cognitive psychology.’ However, there is no logical reason why the social psychological study of peace and war need adopt the same basic position regarding language, thought and reality. It may be that conventional disciplinary assumptions regarding epistemology have unnecessarily limited the subject matter of peace psychology. The argument is not simply a matter of qualitative versus quantitative

methods either – where qualitative methods have been adopted in peace psychology, they have tended to be used within an epistemological framework that allows the core assumptions of the wider discipline to go unchallenged. It might be objected that, ultimately, the aims of peace psychology are primarily political insofar as goals of social justice and positive peace are adopted as the field's *raison d'être* (e.g. Vollhardt & Bilali, 2008). However, to suggest that matters of epistemology are secondary to matters of politics is to neglect the political nature of epistemology. In adopting the conventional (post-)positivist ideology of mainstream psychology, peace psychology may be in danger of reproducing a range of assumptions regarding the nature of the individual, reality, and the role of the social. Given the widespread criticism of such assumptions both within and beyond the discipline of psychology, such a state of affairs might be understood in terms of 'epistemological violence' (Teo, 2010). The merits of a constructionist approach might, therefore, be worth considering at greater length.

In advocating a constructionist approach to matters of war and peace, therefore, we might be well advised to begin by scrutinizing the very terms 'war' and 'peace' themselves. Rather than treating these as straightforward and transparent terms, it is instructive to explore when they are used, and what they are used to do. For instance, Billig (2001) pointed out that in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Centre on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, US President George W. Bush quickly began to frame the events in the language of *war* (see also Montgomery, 2005). This is exemplified through the much-discussed phrase 'war on terror' (see e.g. Erjavec & Volčič, 2007; Graham, Keenan & Dowd, 2004; Hodges & Nilep, 2007; Jackson, 2005; Poole, 2006). We should therefore be careful to examine the discursive construction of war itself, and to be suitably reflexive in our own use of

terminology.<sup>1</sup> Seeking to arrive at a neutral or objective description is not the answer – as Billig (1996) and others have pointed out, attempts to signal neutrality in such matters is itself to take a position, and a potentially controversial one at that.

It should perhaps go without saying that the same applies to ‘peace’, and yet peace researchers (from psychology and other disciplines) have spent a great deal of time arriving at definitions of peace (see Wenden, 1995, for a summary), and comparatively little time exploring the language of peace (for exceptions see Durrheim, 1997; Friedrich, 2007; Schäffner & Wenden, 1995). Indeed, as Gavriely-Nuri (2010, p. 566) has recently argued, ‘in most peace research, ‘peace’ and ‘peace discourse’ are terms whose meanings are usually taken for granted and treated as ‘common knowledge’.’ One immediate priority for a critical discursive peace psychology should therefore be to interrogate how the language of peace is used.

### *Peace, motherhood and apple pie*

Of the many scholarly attempts to define peace, Galtung’s (1969) distinction between positive and negative peace has arguably been the most influential. Galtung defined negative peace as the absence of direct violence, and positive peace as the presence of social justice (and the concomitant absence of what he termed structural violence – those political, social and economic conditions which create and perpetuate inequality and social injustice). This seminal distinction continues to be drawn upon by peace psychologists and social psychologists. For example, it is built into Christie et al’s (2001) definition of the field of peace psychology (see above), and provides the organizing framework for Cohrs and Boehnke’s (2008) overview of social psychological contributions to peace research.

Where peace psychologists – and peace researchers in other disciplines – have been concerned with defining peace, there has perhaps been insufficient attention paid to how peace is defined by social actors themselves, and – crucially – what people are doing when they invoke ‘peace’. This is perhaps surprising when we consider the opening paragraph of Galtung’s (1969) discussion:

In the present paper we shall be using the word ‘peace’ very many times. Few words are so often used and abused – perhaps, it seems, because ‘peace’ serves as a means of obtaining verbal consensus – it is hard to be all-out against peace. [footnote omitted] Thus, when efforts are made to plead almost any kind of policy – say technical assistance, increased trade, tourism, new forms of education, irrigation, industrialization, etc. – then it is often asserted that the policy, in addition to other merits, will also serve the cause of peace.

(Galtung, 1969, p. 167)

Galtung took this commonsense desirability of ‘peace’ as a point of departure for working out exactly what a scholarly definition of peace might look like. An alternative approach might be to suspend – even if only momentarily – our inclination to come up with definitions, and to explore how people define ‘peace’ themselves. In so doing, we might then also take seriously the arguments of discourse analysts (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987) that discourse is fundamentally action-oriented. That is, people perform social actions through discourse.

Durrheim (1997) provides an illustration of precisely how such an approach might cause problems for conventional approaches to ‘peace’. Exploring the use of the language of peace in debates about the end of apartheid in South Africa, Durrheim considers a brief extract from the leader of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement, ‘Colonel’ Leon van der Merwe, who says ‘White doves will not bring peace. If I’m

hungry I will eat a white dove' (1997, p. 41). Durrheim points out that in this passage,

the 'colonel' rejects not peace itself, but the symbols of peace ... Resistance is directed against forms of identity and forms of state associated with peace, but not against the general and vague ideal of peace as Utopia. Everyone agrees that Utopia is preferable to poverty, violence and despair. However, as soon as the details (such as political policy) of what constitutes the state of peace arise, conflict and disagreement proliferate.

*(ibid.)*

Durrheim (1997, p. 42) goes on to outline how arguments over whether post-apartheid South Africa should be a confederacy or a united state involved both sides drawing on the 'general and vague notion of peace':

On the one hand, peace was argued to be derived from a confederation of states, while on the other, it was associated with a unitary state. In this way, the consensual vision of peace as Utopia becomes attached to particular visions of the state.

*(ibid.)*

We can thus see how 'peace' discourse performed a particular social action – or rhetorical function – for speakers advocating quite different versions of the South African polity. Durrheim's work represents an important starting point for a critical discursive peace psychology, yet to date little further research has built upon his analysis. One important way of extending it is to explore how the language of peace is employed in a quite different arena, and one which involves not a context of debate within a polity in which matters of nation-building and state formation are live concerns, but in the established states of western liberal democracy. In such contexts,

nation/statehood may be taken for granted (Billig, 1995), with attention turning outwards towards the appropriateness of intervening elsewhere. This leads to a consideration of how the language of ‘peace’ may be invoked in debates concerning international military conflict.

To illustrate this, two short extracts from a project exploring arguments concerning the Iraq War will be discussed. The extracts come from a corpus of episodes of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s televised political discussion programme, *Question Time*, which were broadcast in February and March 2003, in the weeks running up to the formal declaration of hostilities in Iraq on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2003.<sup>2</sup> *Question Time* features a panel of politicians, journalists and other commentators responding to topical political questions posed by a studio audience. The host, David Dimbleby, chairs the discussions, inviting questions and comments from the audience. The extracts below are transcribed in the notation developed by Gail Jefferson (2004), and a full list of transcription conventions used in these extracts is presented in the appendix. For present purposes, I will focus on two instances in which panellists invoked ‘peace’ during discussions of whether or not to take military action in Iraq. First, let us consider the mobilization of ‘peace’ by an opponent of military action:

Extract 1 (13<sup>th</sup> February 2003)

1 RB (.hh) and what fascinates me and appals  
2 me about both the approach of Tony Blair  
3 (.h) and George Bush is that (.) all the  
4 time they don’t seem to be looking for  
5 peaceful solutions (.h) they are always  
6 using every single excuse [that comes up  
7 every to say [(.)] let’s (.) get in  
8 there]





4       ?       [ ( ° ° mm ° ° ) ]  
 5       MM       speech of Anne Clwyd (.) who is a Labour  
 6               left-winger (.h) a passionate peace  
 7               campaigner (.h) but who talked about  
 8               (.hh) even now at this time in Iraq (.h)  
 9               human rights horrors which are horrific

Michael Meacher – at the time a Government minister – is here arguing the necessity of military intervention, and in so doing he rhetorically works up ‘the state of the poor people of Iraq’ (l. 2). However, by attributing these observations about the Iraqi people to Anne Clwyd, and making relevant the identities of ‘Labour left-winger’ and ‘passionate peace campaigner’, he attends to both his and Clwyd’s stake in the matter. By invoking Clwyd, and making relevant these identities, Meacher constructs the argument as coming from a particularly persuasive source – someone who one would not typically expect to be arguing for military action. This works up Meacher’s own position as essentially equivalent with that of a ‘passionate peace campaigner’, and by extension frames military action in this instance as an ultimately humanitarian intervention.

The present paper is not the place to develop a more extensive analysis of these data, but it is notable that both advocates and opponents of war in these debates sought to mobilise the language of peace in order to advance their own rhetorical position. Whereas we might expect this for opponents of military action, it is in one sense striking that advocates of military action should position their arguments in such a way. Yet in another sense, it is of course entirely unsurprising – as Galtung (1969) recognised, western audiences are familiar with the idea of military action being undertaken for ‘peaceful’ purposes. Many military adventures are described as

‘peacekeeping’, and strategies of ‘liberal interventionism’ are advocated in response to the outbreak of a variety of conflicts. This all sounds very reasonable – who could object to an ‘intervention’ carried out with the best ‘liberal’ intentions? What is to be disputed in the idea of ‘peacekeeping’? The very terms used to describe these activities serve to construct them as reasonable and unobjectionable. However, what such examples serve to highlight is the fundamentally ideological aspect of peace. An attention to how we might achieve ‘peace’ – however we as academics might define this – should therefore go hand-in-hand with an analysis of what the language of peace is used to do across a range of social contexts.

#### *Concluding remarks*

The way in which discourses of ‘peace’ function in such contexts as arguments concerning whether or not to wage war should be central to a critical discursive peace psychology. Similarly, a willingness to engage in critique regarding the ideological assumptions such discourses perpetuate should be at the heart of any critical enterprise. The arguments developed here – necessarily cursory and preliminary though they are – point the way for a new approach to the analysis of ‘peace’, not so much as a goal to be first defined and then achieved, but as a cultural phenomenon to be placed under the critical microscope itself.

If the language of ‘peace’ is used to justify military interventions of various forms, it might be objected that of course this is not *genuine* peace, not the peace advocated by peace activists and by peace researchers across a variety of academic disciplines. But this would be to miss the point that it is the normative nature of peace as something to be aspired to which lies behind all such uses of the language of peace.

Indeed, one useful development for a critical discursive approach might be to explore how peace is woven into military ideologies in the fabric of everyday life.

A psychology which is able to say something meaningful about military institutions and their relationship to wider cultural values such as peace must turn the critical lens on military institutions themselves if it is to begin to address the way in which the modern military machinery of the West has positioned itself as an agent of peace, with the elision of peace and the values of liberal individualism. It is here that the individualism of mainstream social and peace psychology becomes problematic, for the theories of measurement and selfhood enshrined in psychology are bound up with matters of governance in liberal democracies (Rose, 1999). To fail to interrogate such assumptions is to risk tacitly accepting them, and the role they play in sustaining militaristic ideologies and institutions. Scrutinizing ideologies that continue to provide a steady stream of bodies to populate the military, and that perpetuate the normative cultural assumption that there is something necessary and inevitable about military institutions, should be the task of a genuinely critical approach to peace psychology, social psychology, or indeed any psychology.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> It is notable that the last decade has seen the emergence of a new literature on the psychology of terrorism, much of which has received generous state support. It is arguable that this literature frequently fails to subject constructions such as ‘war on terror’ to sufficient critical scrutiny, and as such reproduces (and lends scientific credibility to) state conceptualizations of ‘the problem’. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

<sup>2</sup> Extracts quoted by permission of the BBC.

## Appendix

*Transcription Conventions (adapted from Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, pp. vi-vii)*

- (1.0) The number in parentheses indicates a time gap to the nearest tenth of a second.
- (.) A dot enclosed in parentheses indicates a pause in the talk of less than two-tenths of a second.
- [ ] Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk.
- .hh A dot before an 'h' indicates speaker in-breath. The more h's, the longer the in-breath
- (( )) A description enclosed in double parentheses indicates a non-verbal activity. For example, ((pointing)). Alternatively double parentheses may enclose the transcriber's comments on contextual or other features.
- (guess) The words within single parentheses indicate the transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance.
- that Underlining indicates speaker emphasis.
- ° ° Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk they encompass is spoken noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.

Speaker identification: DD = David Dimbleby (Host); RB = Rosie Boycott (on-screen caption: Journalist and broadcaster); MM = Michael Meacher (on-screen caption: 'Minister for the Environment'). 'Au' indicates a collective audience response (e.g. applause). '?' in the speaker identification column indicates that speaker identification was not possible. When speaker identification represents the transcriber's best guess, the speaker's initials are placed in parentheses.