

# Mere Rhetoric?

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At the start of the 1987 general election, David Owen, then a co-leader of the SDP-Liberal Alliance kicked off his campaign by saying: “reason, not rhetoric will win this election.” By so doing, he not only highlighted the fact that rhetoric has not had a good press in recent decades, often being used as a term of abuse, but also that there may be no escape from it, even when a speaker is being critical of it. ‘Reason, not rhetoric’ is a contrast, and the contrast is, and remains, one of the most powerful rhetorical weapons in the armoury of anyone who wishes to get messages across in a way that strikes a chord with audiences.

After a televised experiment at the 1984 SDP Conference, in which I had been involved in helping a novice speaker to win a standing ovation, a similar example of a rhetorically formulated denial of the value of rhetorical techniques came in a radio interview. Asked what he thought about them, Ken Livingstone, then leader of the GLC, used two consecutive contrasts: “Public speakers are born, not made. People shouldn’t worry about all these techniques; they should just be themselves.” Here, then, was another example someone making use rhetoric to deny its value.

There is, however, little evidence for supposing that it is somehow possible to forego the use of rhetoric and still be a persuasive and effective public speaker. Similarly, however much people may complain about the evils of soundbites, it is difficult to conceive of how it could ever be possible to eliminate them. Whether we call them soundbites, quotable quotes, slogans or aphorisms, lines that stand out from the vast mass of forgettable sentences have always been with us, from the Bible, through literature and politics, to television advertising. The fact that many of them are splendid illustrations of rhetorical technique does not necessarily mean that they are, or should be, regarded with suspicion.

For example, Christianity tends not to be rejected on the grounds that there was something devious about Jesus making such effective use of anecdotes to get key messages across, or because, as a three-part list, the Trinity is ‘mere rhetoric.’

Shakespeare is not denounced for having composed contrasts like ‘I come to bury Caesar; not to praise him’, or three part lists like “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” We do not argue that revolutionaries were somehow duped because they fought under the banners of three-part lists like “liberté, égalité, fraternité”, or “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Our view of Churchill is undiminished by his use of lines like “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning.” Nor do we think any the less of Martin Luther King for the fact that almost every sentence in his *I have a Dream* speech uses imagery or rhetoric.

What we have, then, is a curious situation in which rhetoric from the past comes to be revered and stored in dictionaries of quotations or books like this, whereas rhetoric from the present is likely to be dismissed as yet another soundbite. In his Introduction to the *Penguin Book of Twentieth Century Speeches*, Brian MacArthur makes the point that “every generation judges contemporary speakers unfavourably against the giants of the past.” It may also be that, with a few notable exceptions, it is only with the passage of time and the wisdom of hindsight that good speeches achieve recognition as great speeches. There is, however, another possible reason for this ambivalence about the value of rhetoric, for it seems that we are more willing to be impressed if we think that someone is a ‘gifted’ speaker, naturally endowed with an ability to get the message across effectively, than if we think that they have been schooled, coached, or otherwise assisted by speech writers and coaches. If persuasive skill is ‘natural’, it is commendable and perhaps even charismatic, but if it has been schooled, there is something suspect or devious about it.

Such a view first came to my attention in a letter from a publisher who rejected the manuscript of my book *Our Masters’ Voices*, which reported on research into the main rhetorical techniques that trigger applause in political speeches. The reason given for rejection was that ‘people are cynical enough about politicians already, without publishing this kind of stuff.’ This came as quite a surprise, as the aim of the study had been to observe and describe some of the key factors involved in political speech making, rather than to criticise politicians for being so unscrupulous as use a small range of well-proven verbal techniques to get their points across. However, the publisher’s view that there was something essentially manipulative or artificially contrived about effective political communication was echoed in some of

the other reactions to the book and televised experiment that accompanied its publication.

Equipped with a script that bristled with contrasts, three-part lists and rhetorical questions, Ann Brennan's speech to the 1984 SDP Conference generated so much applause that she only managed to deliver about two thirds of it before running out of time. During the standing ovation that followed, the late Sir Robin Day, who was doing the BBC live commentary, described it as "the most refreshing speech at the conference so far." However, once it became known that she had received help in writing and delivering the speech, opinions suddenly changed. I was written off as an Oxford don who is "some kind of expert in how people wave their hands about when speaking." Words like 'stunt', 'hoax' and 'put-up job' sprang to the lips of commentators, as they went around the conference hall trying to collect statements of disapproval from delegates. One reporter looked visibly disappointed when he elicited the reply: "I think we were applauding the sentiment and the message. And, in any case, if you can be coached to get a standing ovation, I'd like to take the course of training."

The 'hoax' line of criticism was at its height at the point where the commentators thought that the speaker was merely a stooge, who had been used by us to perpetrate a practical joke on conference. It began to decline once it emerged that she was a fully paid up SDP member and local activist, and that the message she had put to the party was her own strongly held belief -- namely that if it was going to get anywhere, the SDP would have to broaden its appeal to attract working class voters like herself. In other words, had we invented the message and used her as a mouthpiece, the 'hoax' claim might have stuck. But, at a time when it was well-known that the then Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, had help from teams of professional speech writers, television producers and conference impresarios, it was difficult to claim there was anything particularly wrong about a complete beginner being given some help to get her message across as effectively as possible.

Some examples from the speaking career of Paddy Ashdown further underline the dubiousness of rating 'gifted' speakers as being somehow more genuine than 'coached' speakers. In the early stages of collecting videotaped data for the original research project, one of the speakers at the 1981 Liberal Assembly attracted our

attention as a speaker with potential. Speaking at high speed, and dressed in a blue sweater and open-necked shirt, the then prospective parliamentary candidate for Yeovil was getting a lot of positive responses from the audience. One line that stood out was a three-part list, incorporating imagery and repetition: “The armed truce that passes as peace for us has been bought in other people’s blood, on other people’s territory and at a price of other people’s misery.” By the time the applause got under way, he was already into his next sentence, at which point he broke off and looked up from his text, visibly surprised by the power of his own rhetoric. At that early point in his political career, then, it could be said that he was showing signs of being ‘a natural.’

Whether or not he was one of the naturally gifted few, this is not how he rated himself. Otherwise, he would presumably not have turned to people like me for advice on speech-writing and delivery. What is clear, however, is that audiences responded no less favourably to the ‘schooled’ Ashdown than they had done to the ‘unschooled’ Ashdown. But the question in the present context is: should they have done? Should lines composed by someone else with a brief to translate his ideas into rhetorically more striking forms have been treated as suspect or devious? For example, the basic message he wanted to convey to the 1988 merger debate was that “we need to stop squabbling between ourselves and frittering away the achievements of the SDP-Liberal Alliance”. It was actually delivered as a contrast, incorporating biblical imagery and a degree of repetition: “We need to stop sounding like the Tower of Babel, and start building a tower of strength.” On winning the leadership of the Social and Liberal Democrats later in 1988, his basic concern was that, “after nine months of messing about since the 1987 election, there’s a danger that the public is forgetting we exist, let alone might be worth taking seriously.” This became a simple contrast with repetition of the key word: “We have to show people that we’re not just back in business, but really mean business.”

As with the case of Ann Brennan, if lines such as these were conveying messages that had been imposed on, rather than derived from, the speaker, there would be a case for saying that there is something devious or unscrupulous about deploying rhetoric in this way. But the case begins to fall away if the lines express the ideas of the speaker, and if he or she is comfortable with delivering the revised form of words.

Nearly two decades of research and training in the field of public speaking and presentation skills have taught me that some people do indeed have a 'natural' facility to use rhetoric, imagery, anecdotes and all the other ingredients of effective speech-making, but that they are in a minority. The vast majority of us dread public speaking, and there must be many who are deeply frustrated by the fact that they feel passionately about something, yet lack the technical skills to communicate it effectively. So when Ken Livingstone said that "public speakers are born, not made" and that "people should not worry about technique, but just be themselves", he was, in effect, saying: "Leave persuasive power in the hands of those of us who happen to have had the good fortune to speak this way naturally." A more democratic and less elitist view is that it is much fairer to liberate the techniques that the gifted use naturally and without realising it, and to make them available for anyone to use.

To dismiss or denigrate rhetoric is to ignore the fact that its structures and devices provide an infinitely adaptable tool-kit for packaging messages in a simple and striking way that audiences can grasp immediately. Without it, persuasive discourse and debate become much more difficult, probably to the point of impossibility. To complain about it is to complain about the way the spoken language works, and about language forms that have been with us since before the invention of writing. And The claim that people who have learnt to use it are somehow less genuine than the naturally gifted is like complaining that anyone without perfect pitch, or an ability to play a musical instrument by ear, is not a genuine musician.

However suspicious some critics may be of all things rhetorical, the fact remains that there is still a demand, and perhaps even a need, for impressive displays of rhetoric. At least three examples stand out from the recent past: Ronald Reagan's speech after the Challenger shuttle disaster in 1986, Tony Blair's comments immediately after the death of the Princess of Wales, and the address by her brother, Lord Spencer, at her funeral in Westminster Abbey. Their impact was not diminished either by their use of rhetoric, or by questions about whose hand lay behind some of the lines. What mattered was that they caught the national moods in response to tragic news. Something else they had in common is that they were short enough to be shown in their entirety on television. In other words, they worked with mass audiences via a

medium that increasingly operates on the assumption that, except in special cases like these, speeches make bad television.

Between 1968 and 1988, the length of excerpts from speeches shown on American television news programmes during presidential campaigns fell from an average of 42 seconds in 1968 to 9 seconds in 1988. In the UK, during the 1979 general election campaign, BBC 2 showed a nightly half-hour programme of excerpts from the day's speeches. It was not continued during the 1983 election, and, by 1997, viewers were much more likely to see shots of politicians speaking in the background, with the all important foreground being dominated by a TV reporter summarising what the speaker was saying.

As broadcast excerpts from speeches become shorter and rarer, our chances of hearing and evaluating what politicians are saying directly from their own mouths are increasingly restricted to long set-piece interviews, phone-ins and short responses in the course of endless walkabouts and photo opportunities. This reflects a view, apparently shared by broadcasters and politicians alike, that, in the television age, a more informal conversational approach to communication is more effective than traditional oratory. It was also a view endorsed, mainly on the basis of observations of Ronald Reagan, in the concluding chapter of *Our Masters' Voices*, and which may now be worth revisiting.

The reason for supposing that a low-key, conversational style of delivery is likely to play well with television audiences is much the same as the reason why a low-key style of acting works better on film and television than on a live stage. In a theatre or conference hall, the speaker is communicating across a very long distance, compared with speakers in a conversation, who are typically no more than a metre or two apart. Without a degree of exaggeration of intonation, emphasis, pausing, movement and gesture, a speaker is likely to come across as static, flat and monotonous. When it comes to transferring this to the television screen, the problem is that the zoom lens produces a close-up image of verbal and non-verbal behaviours that are designed for long distance communication, and transmits it into millions of living rooms. In other words, a way of speaking appropriate for a large audience in a formal setting is seen and heard by small audiences of two or three viewers in a very informal setting. To people sitting a conversational distance away from their screens,

often engaging in conversation with others in the room, traditional theatrical styles of delivery, when seen and heard at close quarters, are likely to come across as excessively manic or over-dramatic. Indeed, this may well have been one of the reasons why former Labour leader Neil Kinnock, one of the finest live orators of his generation, never managed to achieve high personal ratings with the mass audience beyond the conference hall.

However, if Ronald Reagan, and more recently Bill Clinton, successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of a more folksy style of delivery, the point which does not yet seem to have been taken on board by some recent and contemporary British politicians is that the case for conversational style has more to do with adapting the delivery, than with adapting the way the words and scripts are put together. Reagan, in particular, demonstrated repeatedly that powerfully constructed rhetorical scripts can be effectively delivered in a chatty, low-key conversational tone of voice. He certainly did not forego the use of tightly structured scripts in favour of the much more discursive, less structured, often ungrammatical ramblings that we associate with the language of conversation. In fact, had he been judged on his comparatively rare unscripted performances, it is highly unlikely that he would have achieved recognition as the 'great communicator.'

Meanwhile, there are some British politicians (and/or their advisors), who seem to have concluded that the words, as well as the delivery of them, should be chatty and conversational. Two such examples from the tradition represented in this volume are David Owen, former leader of the SDP, and Charles Kennedy, current leader of the Liberal Democrats, both of whom have made conversationally delivered speeches from conversationally constructed scripts. The problem with such an approach is that it is likely to have negative consequences both for the audience listening to the speech in the hall and for the way the media covers the event. Low levels of rhetorical content will generate low rates of applause from the audience in the conference hall. The media is then likely to interpret and report on this as a less than enthusiastic response from the party faithful. At the same time, the shortage of rhetorically structured quotable quotes makes it more difficult for reporters and editors to select soundbites for playing or reporting on news programmes. In the absence of these, there is then a danger that the media coverage will devote more time

to discussing the style of delivery, and whether or not it worked, than to reporting on the actual political messages the speaker was hoping to get across.

If politicians are still learning how to make speeches that can inspire both the audience immediately in front of them, and the one watching television in their homes, it is perhaps time that the broadcasters themselves gave some thought to the impact on audiences of their preference for showing countless extended interviews with politicians during elections, rather than more or longer excerpts from speeches. These quasi-conversational confrontations between top politicians and top interviewers may be easy to organise and convenient to schedule. However, whether they make better television than excerpts from speeches is debatable. Their quasi-conversational nature limits the time available to develop any particular point to seconds rather than minutes. Like the conversationally worded speech, memorable lines or displays of passion or enthusiasm from the speaker are few and far between.

Once in this conversational cockpit, many politicians proceed, with breathtaking regularity, to flout one of the most basic conversational rules of all, namely that questions should be followed by answers. Treating questions as prompts to say anything they like, or opportunities for yet another evasion of an issue, have become part of the routine repertoire that is inflicted daily on viewers and listeners. If politicians seriously believe that viewers and listeners lack the intelligence to see at a glance when they are being evasive, they can hardly complain when people conclude that they are patronising or arrogant. If they think that audiences will be impressed or inspired by the tortuous circumlocutions in which so much of their evasiveness is expressed, they should not be surprised when people conclude that they are out of touch with the way real people tick. We hear that politicians are becoming worried about their low esteem in the eyes of the public, and about growing voter apathy. Perhaps they should consider whether one factor might be that the way they speak in interviews is at best bland or boring, and at worst evasive and downright irritating.

Yet the broadcasting establishment still seems to be committed to the view that interviews, however sterile and tedious they may be, make better television than excerpts from well crafted passionately delivered speeches. If they ever get round to reassessing their policy, one piece of evidence to which their attention should be drawn is the fact that editors and publishers of books do not seem to find televised

interviews interesting, inspiring or provocative enough to merit the publication of collections of *Great Interviews*, whether Liberal or of any other kind. Rhetoric and oratory may well have had a bad press in recent years, but readers of this book will surely be thankful that it consists of speeches rather than transcripts of interviews. They can therefore look forward to reading carefully developed arguments in language robust enough to have survived the immediate moment of delivery to become a form of historical literature. Without the application of both reason and rhetoric, these speeches would never have been noticed in the first place, but would have been forgotten and more or less unreadable.