

THE OFFICIOUS BYSTANDER

THE DEATH OF A STATESMAN

Until about fifty years ago, the terms “statesman” and “orator” were used almost interchangeably. To take two obvious examples, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, and those of Winston Churchill, are quoted - not merely as proof of their statesmanship - but as being virtually synonymous with it.

How much do we really know about the former - his life, his policies, his “statesmanlike” acts and decisions - apart from the fact that he was President of the American Union at the time of the Civil War, an opponent of slavery, and the victim of an assassin’s bullet? Yet, not only in his own land, but throughout much of the world, he is revered as one of history’s great champions of human rights. This reverence is focussed almost entirely on a short speech, which has come to be known as the *Gettysburg Address*; and of this short speech, it is usually only the first sentence which strikes a chord of recollection even amongst his admirers:

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. ...

Churchill’s speeches are better known - perhaps because they occurred more recently and were recorded and broadcast; perhaps because they relate to circumstances of greater continuing relevance. Yet only a few catch-words are instantly recognised: “blood, toil, tears and sweat”; “we shall fight on the beaches”; “This was their finest hour”; “Never in the field in the human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”; “... an iron curtain has descended across the Continent”; and so on. How many Australians recall that Churchill specifically included Australia when he spoke of “their finest hour”, saying:

We have fully informed and consulted all the self-governing Dominions, these great communities far beyond the oceans who have been built up on our laws and on our civilisation, and who are absolutely free to choose their course, but are absolutely devoted to their ancient Motherland, and who feel themselves inspired by the same emotions which lead me to

stake our all upon duty and honour. We have fully consulted them, and I have received from their Prime Ministers - Mr. Mackenzie King of Canada, Mr. Menzies of Australia, Mr. Fraser of New Zealand, and General Smuts of South Africa ... - I have received from all these eminent men, who all have Governments behind them elected on wide franchises, who are all there because they represent the will of their people, messages couched in the most moving terms in which they endorse our decision to fight on, and declare themselves ready to share our fortunes and to persevere to the end. That is what we are going to do.

Today, speech-making has been replaced by the 10 or 15 second “sound grab” for radio and television news. Anything longer than this is regarded as exceeding the attention-span of the television or radio audience. Even to hear the full text of the most moving tribute paid by the Australian Governor-General, Sir William Deane, at the recent memorial service for victims of the canyoning tragedy at Interlaken in Switzerland, one had to view CNN or BBC World - the Australian news media chose only to broadcast “sound grabs” of 10 or 15 seconds’ duration.

If one tries to think of a truly memorable speech delivered in the last half-century, there are very few obvious examples: Martin Luther King Jnr.’s “I have a dream” speech; John F Kennedy’s “Ask not what your country can do for you” speech, as well as his “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” speech; but very few others. In the last quarter-century, only one instance of great public oratory springs to mind, namely the Earl Spencer’s eulogy at the funeral of his sister, the Princess of Wales.

Apart from Sir Robert Menzies (who first became Prime Minister before the Second World War), eight Australians have succeeded to that office during the Century’s second half. Of these, only one - Gough Whitlam - stands any chance of being remembered as an orator. Others may be recalled for colourful but ephemeral one-liners, like Bob Hawke’s “silly old bugger” (addressed to an elderly voter who had the temerity to challenge Hawke). Paul Keating surely deserves a place in history, for his seemingly endless supply of highly inventive insults: “wound up like a thousand day clock”; “slither out of the Cabinet room like a mangy maggot”; “the greatest job and investment destroyer since the bubonic plague”; “like a lizard on a rock - alive, but looking dead”; “an intellectual rust bucket”; “the Honourable Gentleman's hair, like his

intellect, will recede into the darkness”; “painted, perfumed gigolos”; “a political carcass with a coat and tie on”; “intellectual hobos”; “a 24 carat pissant”; “antediluvian troglodytes”; “Just because you swallowed a f***ing dictionary when you were about 15 doesn't give you the right to pour a bucket of s**t over the rest of us”; “lucky to get a job cleaning s**thouses if I ever become Prime Minister”; and so forth. But, as examples of late Twentieth Century Australian political oratory, Whitlam’s “Men and Women of Australia” electoral speeches, and particularly his “Well may we say ‘God save the Queen’, for nothing will save the Governor-General” speech, are the only ones destined to live on in the public memory.

Why is it that oratory is no longer regarded as an important skill for politicians and other public figures ?

No doubt the electronic media have much to answer for. Before the days of radio, and especially television, important speeches were reproduced in the newspapers at length. Even in the early days of radio, significant speeches were broadcast in their entirety. The result of the “sound grab” is that, unless an important point can be summed up in a brief (and preferably witty) aphorism, it does not get air-play.

Great speech-making is not just a matter of what is said, but also the way that it is said. Choice of vocabulary and sentence construction, and other rhetorical devices, are what make a speech memorable.

Any analysis of Churchill’s speeches shows that he was a rhetorician of the Victorian age, given to all sorts of flourishes and devices which added impact to the words he spoke. Working with a vocabulary far removed from the monosyllabic style of present-day politicians, he chose words for their sound as well as their substance. Thus, in describing the evils of Nazism, he said:

We are assured that novel methods will be adopted, and when we see the originality of malice, the ingenuity of aggression, which our enemy displays, we may certainly prepare ourselves for every kind of novel stratagem and every kind of brutal and treacherous manoeuvre.

His great speeches contain snippets of poetry and other literary references, and historical allegories. So he described the prospect of defeat as “the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science”; and the enemy he called “a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime”.

Would Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address have been quite as memorable if, rather than using words which were (even then) somewhat archaic, he had commenced “Eighty-seven years ago ...” ? Would we recall Kennedy’s admonition if, instead of the quaint sentence construction which he adopted, he had simply said, “Don’t ask what your country can do for you” ? Would “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” be remembered at all, if he had said it in English rather than German ? Would Churchill’s “We shall fight on the beaches” speech have had such an impact, if it were not for the speech-maker’s device of repetition: “... we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, ... we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills” ? Or would Dr. King’s impassioned plea for black America have had as much impact, were the line “I have a dream” not repeated with increasing emphasis no fewer than ten times throughout this short address ?

Because great speeches often include unfamiliar words, unfamiliar sentence constructions, and other rhetorical devices, they require concentration and thought on the part of the listener - which is why they are entirely unsuitable for television or radio, or for the tabloid press. Contemporary politicians wish to convey their message to the widest possible audience, so it must be suitable for broadcasting, and pitched at a level where it is readily intelligible even to the least educated and most unthinking members of society. Today, well-constructed and powerful speeches are reserved for occasions - like funerals and formal dinners - where courtesy requires the audience to listen politely and attentively. Perhaps this is why the Earl Spencer’s eulogy is one of the few memorable speeches of recent times.

But is this merely a change in our modes of communication, or is it a symptom of a greater change in Western society ? I have suggested that, fifty years ago, the words “orator” and “statesman” were used almost interchangeably. If there are no more orators, is this because there are no more statesmen ?

The word “statesman” is no longer fashionable - except to describe someone as an “elder statesman”. This is only partly due to feminism’s etymologically misconceived campaign against words ending with “man”, which are not regarded as “politically correct” because (so feminists argue) such words are not “gender neutral”. But even if the unattractive expression “statesperson” is substituted, are there any “statespeople” left in the world ?

This is an issue which has confronted journalists, who, with the century’s end rapidly approaching, have busied themselves with writing articles about the last 100 years. When they come to identify the Twentieth Century’s great leaders, almost all of those put forward became statesmen in the first half of the century - FD Roosevelt, Churchill, de Gaulle, Woodrow Wilson, Gandhi, and so on. Statespeople of the Twentieth Century’s second half are a rare breed, though some would grudgingly allow this status to JF Kennedy and Martin Luther King - based largely on their oratory, and perhaps their untimely deaths. The only people regularly suggested as contenders for contemporary statesmanship (statespersonship ?) are Nelson Mandela and Mother Theresa - people whose deeds speak very much more loudly than their words.

The absence of statesmanship in the modern world is no doubt linked with the demise of oratory - not because either phenomenon is caused by the other, but because both result from the same cause: the mass media’s preoccupation with what is trivial and evanescent, rather than what is important and lasting. President Clinton’s extra-marital liaisons are no more salacious than those of JF Kennedy (not to mention the all-but-forgotten US President, Grover Cleveland) - and certainly rather less scandalous than those of Thomas Jefferson (who is said to have fathered a child to his black slave) or Abraham Lincoln (who, at least according to the modern gay movement, maintained a homosexual relationship). It is unthinkable, in contemporary times, that a (male)

Queensland Premier and his (male) Attorney-General could live together, with their private lives remaining private, as did Sir Robert Herbert and John Bramston - who even called their mutual home "Herston", as an amalgam of their own surnames. Winston Churchill's "substance abuse" may not have been illegal, but consuming a daily bottle of brandy and large quantities of cigars would hardly have enhanced his prospects in the modern political environment.

FD Roosevelt is widely (and justly) regarded as this Century's greatest US President. Would he have even achieved that office, if the press and media of his era had not conspired to conceal his disability from the public? Would he have retained that office, if the press and media had disclosed details of his "3 martinis before breakfast" drinking habits, let alone his numerous intimate relationships with women other than his much-respected wife? Today's media would have had a field-day with Australian politicians, from Sir Samuel Griffith to Sir Robert Menzies, who saw nothing objectionable in accepting fee-paying briefs whilst holding high political office.

There is a French saying that "no man is a hero to his own valet" - the gallic equivalent of our own saying, "familiarity breeds contempt". The modern media, especially television, have broken down the wall of isolation which once separated society's powerful and influential citizens from the common herd. They have become daily guests in our living-rooms. We see and hear them, not only when they are well-groomed and well-prepared, but also when they are unkempt, flustered, and unready for attention. We feel that we know them.

Many public figures report that, when in public places - on the street, at the shopping centre, in airport lounges, at the beach - complete strangers address them as friends. The face is familiar, so the stranger nods in recognition or exchanges pleasantries. Only afterwards is the stranger acutely embarrassed to realize that the person, assumed to be an acquaintance, is actually a movie-star or politician. One is reminded of the story told about the English conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, of meeting a familiar looking lady at Fortnum & Mason's. Sir Thomas could not recall the lady's name, but vaguely remembered that he knew the lady's sister. So he enquired

after her sister's health, and got a positive response. Still uncertain whom he was talking to, Beecham asked, "And what's she up to these days?" The predictable response was, "Still Queen."

Fifty years ago, politicians and other public figures had the privilege of presenting themselves to us - the public - on their own terms. Published photographs were studio portraits representing immaculately dressed personages of great solemnity. Published utterances were those which had been carefully researched and written, presented without pressure or interruption. Even speeches which did not purport to be speeches - like President Roosevelt's "fireside chats" - were carefully scripted. This all changed, first when presidential candidates JF Kennedy and RM Nixon agreed to debate one another "live" on television (26 September 1960), and shortly afterwards when President Kennedy first allowed the "live" televising of presidential press conferences (25 January 1961). It is said that the "live" debate cost Nixon the election - although the better debater, he had less "presence" on the screen, and was thought to appear "shifty" !

Television has taken away the mystique of public figures, and restored them to the status of mere mortals. Is this a bad thing? Not according to President Truman, who thought that:

"This kind of news conference where reporters can ask any question they can dream up - directly of the President of the United States - illustrates how strong and how vital our democracy is. There is no other country in the world where the chief of state submits to such unlimited questioning ..."

Today, there is no democratic country in the world where the head of government can avoid constant media attention, scrutiny and intrusion. Truman may have been right - perhaps this enhances democracy. The result, though, is that we now live in a world without statesmen.