

THE ART OF GREAT SPEECHES

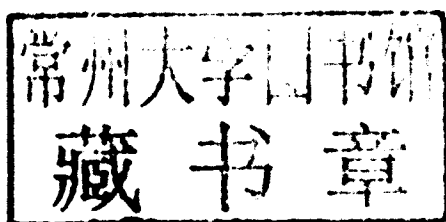
AND WHY WE REMEMBER THEM



Dennis Glover

The Art of Great Speeches and why we remember them

Dennis Glover



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The Art of Great Speeches and why we remember them

What makes a great speech 'great'?

The Art of Great Speeches uses insights from classical thinkers to reveal how great orators such as Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, the Kennedys, Al Gore and Hitler persuaded their audiences with such conviction.

Featuring excerpts from 70 of the world's greatest and most controversial speeches in history and drama, this fascinating book breaks down the key elements of classical and modern oratory to reveal the rhetorical techniques that make them so memorable. It shows how master speechwriters connect with their audiences, seize a moment, project character, use facts convincingly and destroy their opponents' arguments as they try to force the hand of history or create memorable drama.

Part history, part defence of oratory, part call for political inspiration, part handbook, *The Art of Great Speeches* does what no other book does – it explains *why* these speeches are great.

Dennis Glover is a professional speechwriter for some of Australia's most prominent political and business leaders, and an academic historian of oratory. He is a graduate of Monash University, and he took a PhD in History at Cambridge University. He has worked on the staff of three federal Labor Party leaders and written speeches for two prime ministers.

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Introduction

1



A few years ago in my country there was a minor media storm. Newspapers began reporting the ‘scandal’ that some politicians had been hiring a speechwriter to draft their speeches. It became an issue on talkback radio; the speechwriter became a target of anger, and it culminated in headlines like: ‘Another minister caught using a speechwriter’. That speechwriter was me.

This episode struck me as strange. After all, isn’t making speeches what politicians are supposed to do? Aren’t the politicians we love the most the ones who employ the best speechwriters? Isn’t it the case that words can outlive deeds and inspire the best to run for office? What, after all, are the Kennedys and Martin Luther King today but a rich legacy of inspiration for a new generation? And don’t the newspapers usually applaud loudly when a politician makes a speech that’s intelligent, witty, surprising and inspiring? Those headlines seemed to me the equivalent of: ‘surgeon caught buying sharper scalpel’.

Some time later, the same newspapers had another complaint: the dismal standard of oratory of modern politicians, especially the then Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, who in one prominent editorial was given ‘10 out of 10 for content, nought out of ten for delivery’. This happened in the United States and Britain too, where Republican presidential nominee John McCain was overshadowed by his own previously unknown running mate, and Gordon Brown was commonly voted the most boring public speaker in the nation – more boring even than the notoriously inarticulate football player David Beckham. This is a major problem: the inability to articulate a sense of purpose and direction and inspire others to follow can drain leaders, parties and governments of

energy and support, and cause much needed reform to fail. Why is it happening?

The answer, in part, is ‘too much information’. Politicians today seem in thrall to contestable facts. Every generation is dominated by certain professions – our parents’ by engineers and sociologists; ours by economists and pollsters. The effect has been to turn our elected representatives from leaders into technocrats. Afraid of being accused of sounding inauthentic or lightweight, or off-message, or spouting rhetoric, their words and eventually their own personalities become pre-programmed and predictable. Their speech drowns in their numbers and economic modelling. It’s a failing compounded by a political backroom culture that makes it easy to get to the top without ever having mastered the art of oratory. Common to both left and right, this failing is robbing our democracy of energy, and the cost is paid in the wreckage of governments and political movements unable to enthuse their followers or provide an adequate riposte to their opponents. In Australia, even the hardest heads in the national press gallery agreed that Kevin Rudd’s poor oratory contributed to his dramatic downfall and replacement as prime minister by the more engaging Julia Gillard.

This failure of the good to inspire too often leaves us with an invidious choice – between the dour and the demagogue. The choice should be unnecessary.

2



Why is there resistance today to good speechwriting and good oratory, especially when the appearance of a great speechmaker is always greeted with extraordinary public enthusiasm? Whenever a new one appears you can almost see the electorate bending towards the stage, eager for more.

The arguments against putting real effort into oratory – including the arguments against hiring speechwriters, once directed against me – come down to this: our politicians should always speak to us plainly, without artifice, and especially without their words being

written by others. This seems common sense, and, in a naïve way, even idealistic. But in an age when politicians commonly make two or three speeches in a single day, as well as actually run the country, is it practical to ask them to research and write them all themselves? More importantly, is it desirable?

This question may sound like special pleading from someone who makes his living by writing speeches for others, but it is in fact a question almost as old as democracy itself.

In 161 BC the Roman Senate decided that anyone caught writing speeches for others faced expulsion from the city. The senators were acting on a belief that originated in a famous philosophical debate some 250 years prior between members of the Platonic Academy and their rivals the Sophists. The former believed that political decisions should be based on the truth alone, guided by the advice of the best philosophers. The employment of experts to advise in the arts of persuasion, they reasoned, would potentially make ‘the weaker argument the stronger’ – something dangerous in the Athens of their day when matters of life and death were decided by majority vote in mass citizen assemblies. The latter, the Sophists, disagreed. More politically realistic, they recognised something we can all observe today: when it comes to politics, humans are swayed by emotion as much as by logic and facts.

As taxpayers, mortgage holders, shareholders and political advisers, we all have an interest in the logical presentation of facts, especially numbers with dollar signs attached to them. Presenting facts logically is an important part of successful political speechmaking. But as humans we need more. For good or ill, our minds respond to emotional stimulation. There’s much more to our lives than the things we can count. The very existence of religion, for instance, shows that we want so much more: spiritual uplift, moral affirmation, inspiration, a quest. Our politicians need to give us these things; if they don’t they are neglecting one-half of our brains and one-half of their job.

This observation is so obvious to most people that it hardly seems worth mentioning, but still so many politicians continue to

ignore it. Armed with consultancy reports as thick as telephone books and PowerPoint slide decks of increasing sophistication, they think the rational exposition of the facts alone will defeat the enemies of thoughtful progress or considered conservatism. And they are egged on by the (usually well-scripted and highly emotive) proponents of 'plain talking' and 'common sense' who dominate the airwaves and denounce the arts of persuasion as the spin practised by hollow apparatchiks. We are, it seems, in Athens once more, where the knowledgeable and the good are condemned to eternal defeat by the shallow and the bad.

Is there a way out?

The answer comes from Rome. In the first century BC, Rome witnessed a revival of classical rhetoric. As the increasingly anarchic republic, weakened by the assaults of populist demagogues, began to fall apart, the foremost orator and thinker of the day, Cicero, recognised that the defenders of the republic could only prevail if they first shed their moral qualms about appealing to the masses. He recognised that in the world in which we actually live, as opposed to the world that exists in the clouds sometimes inhabited by philosophers, the good may choose to ignore the arts of persuasion, but the bad certainly will not. Cicero believed his troubled times were ones for good people to wise up about the realities of popular opinion: that it was fickle, responsive to emotional stimulus, and could be won over by eloquence. The most knowledgeable and just people, he argued, had an obligation not just to be smart and true, but also to become effective orators. Cicero's message was that persuasion need not mean hollow, cynical, confected spin; it can mean endowing truth, judgement and moral integrity with greater force.

3



This book is dedicated to Cicero's ideal. It addresses a question posed by a despairing newspaper commentator:

How can intelligent, democratic politics survive when the best lack conviction and the worst monopolise passion?
What hope for the civilising activity of politics when convictions are constantly trimmed and abandoned to meet the demands of the modern world's high-velocity media?

I come from the liberal or progressive side of politics, but my many conservative friends share the same concerns. So whether you are left or right, if you are worried about the threat to democratic politics posed by the screaming pedlars of cynicism and dishonesty, or equally concerned about the triumph of shallowness over substance, you have a duty to put your case more persuasively. This book aims to help.

It can be read in a number of ways:

- As the foregoing suggests, as a defence of oratory – with its potential to unite passion with substance and ethics in the name of democracy – against its detractors
- As a history of oratory and an attempt to understand how it has evolved – from classical times, via the genius of Renaissance writers such as Shakespeare, to the digital age
- As explanation of how oratory works – uncovering the simple components of the art of rhetoric to enable those accepting the noble call of public life to speak more effectively, and to arm the rest of us, plain citizens, with the ability to recognise when persuasion stops and demagoguery begins
- As a source of technical and practical lessons for the budding speechwriter.

As in any endeavour, it helps to examine success. The book therefore uses the insights provided by the classical authorities, notably Cicero himself, to analyse the great speeches in history. Bookshop shelves bend under the weight of collections of 'great', 'stirring', 'history-changing' speeches, but few explain how those speeches work and why they deserve those adjectives. Here, we break down the speeches we all know – by Socrates, Shakespeare's