

MASTERCLASS

Effective speech- writing

by Simon Lancaster

Of all the letters that fall upon a senior civil servant's desk, none lands with a more sickening thump than the invitation to deliver a speech.

"Isn't this a job for the politicians? What if, God forbid, I do a Casey?"

In 2005, Louise Casey gave a speech to police officers in which she vowed to "deck" the next Number 10 official who mentioned "bloody evidence-based policy" to her.

Membership of the Louise Casey fan club quadrupled immediately, but she probably could have done without the resultant press coverage.

Speechmaking has always been an essential skill for mandarins. Great oratory is, at its essence, the art of persuasion, argument and psychology: essential weapons in the arsenal of any civil servant. The greatest administrators in history have also been impressive public speakers: from Pliny the Younger to Sir Gus O'Donnell.

So what makes a good speech? There are three overarching principles, most of which feel counter-intuitive to career civil servants.

The first is that the audience is more important than the speaker.

Even Barack Obama could not convince an Institute of Directors audience that regulation is something to be cherished. A more realistic aim might be to convince them that you understand their concerns.

Most audiences are easily distracted: with thoughts racing through their minds and Blackberries vibrating in their pockets. We must compete for their attention as a smart advertising agency would, with startling images, killer facts and exciting language.

Most audiences are naturally cynical. We should pre-empt their doubts and anticipate their questions (which tend to be variations on "So what?", "Who cares?" and "Oh yeah?").

Most audiences have fixed views on certain things. The reaction against Tony Blair's speech at the Women's Institute was ferocious because they felt their values were

being challenged.

You can be honest without being offensive. The most successful speakers anchor their arguments within their audience's values and use this to shift their opinions. This way, your message feels not like an invasion but a reinforcement of what your audience already believes.

The second principle is that emotions are more powerful than logic.

By appealing to people's emotions—stirring anger or playing to fear—we can bypass rational scrutiny and strike straight into people's hearts. It's like throwing a brick through someone's window then knocking on the door and selling them a burglar alarm: very powerful.

Logic is an optional extra in most speeches. The most oft-repeated line in ministerial speeches in recent years has been: "In 1997 we gave independence to the Bank of England. Since then, we have experienced the longest period of uninterrupted growth in the country's history."

The third principle is that less is more. Mark Twain famously apologised for writing a long letter because he didn't have time to write a short one.

The same is true with speechmaking. Select your speeches carefully and, when you're writing, pare your arguments to the bone. Everyone prefers a speech that ends too soon to one which drags on—and you can always move to Q&As if there is a gap at the end.

The civil service is not known for its custodianship of the English language; and speech-making can feel

like an anathema to civil servants trained in the arts of discretion. But by plundering techniques from the ancient art of oratory, we gain the power to inspire, motivate and lead: vital qualities for those aiming to be at the top of the modern civil service. **PSM**

The art of persuasion: the six A's

- 1 Analyse audience
- 2 Take aim
- 3 Grab attention
- 4 Secure acceptance
- 5 Win agreement
- 6 Motivate action

Simon Lancaster was Whitehall's longest serving speech-writer before setting up Bespoke Speechwriting Services Ltd, London's leading commercial speech-writing agency. He now writes for a range of corporate clients and also runs specialist training courses. Further information is available at www.bespokespeeches.com.