

# The lost art of oratory

Former Whitehall speechwriter **Simon Lancaster** argues that fine oratory should be a priority for politicians and civil servants alike

Most politicians fear giving speeches – almost as much as the public dreads listening to them. The lectern has a cruel capacity to render even the mighty vulnerable and exposed for a short time.

Who could forget Blair's slow hand-clap at the Women's Institute? Jack Straw being shouted down by Walter Wolfgang in 2005? Or Gerald Ratner's jaw-droppingly misjudged speech to the Institute of Directors in 1991?

Ratner notoriously explained to an aghast business audience that his company could sell cut-glass sherry decanters for £4.95 because they were "total crap" – in a swipe, dismissing all of his customers as either tasteless or, worse, stupid.

The blowback was as fierce as it was predictable. Within hours, the press onslaught began. Within weeks, half a billion pounds had been knocked from the company's value. Within months, Gerald Ratner was sacked, his once glittering reputation shot to pieces.

Today, that speech stands alongside Nero's burning down Rome as one of the worst decisions in history. But Ratner's tale belies a wider truth. We're simply not very good at making speeches in Britain any more.

In the recent mayoral election, Boris and Ken competed for whose bells rang the loudest, rather than engaging in any serious battle of ideas.

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The public turned off, the election turned sterile and the Westminster anoraks turned West, to gaze in awe at the sky-scraping oratory emerging from the US primaries, where the messiah-like Barack Obama showed us how it could be done.

Britain and America are oceans apart when it comes to oratory. In Washington, there is a specialist speechwriting industry centred

around Capitol Hill. In London, speeches generally get written by whoever is left standing when the music stops.

This approach is as excruciating for the person writing it as it is for the person delivering it, not to mention the poor souls who have to listen to it.

The trouble is that speeches are often seen as the elderly relative of modern communications: not as provocative as guerrilla marketing, nor as sleek as branding, nor as sexy as a new logo.

But speeches can still make or break careers in a flash. David Cameron largely secured the leadership of the Conservative Party with a fresh "look – no notes" approach. David Davis's limp performance at the podium cost him his dreams.

My argument is that speeches are actually *more*, not less important in modern communications, for three reasons.

First, because speeches represent the antithesis of all we hate about modern communications. If viral emails are scattergun, a speech is targeted. If sound-bites seem superficial, a speech demonstrates depth. Speeches hark back to an age when communication was more personal.

Second, speeches help organisations to create a distinct voice, which is not as fluffy an ambition as it sounds. Innocent Drinks, Apple and Virgin have amassed incredible customer and employee loyalty through developing a clear corporate voice.

Third, speeches provide an opportunity to explain and contextualize complex organisational strategies – something which is increasingly difficult in a multilayered world, when the media demands seven-second sound-bites.

Speeches represent the bridge between policy and communications. Where a policy contains a loose plank, speeches frequently expose that squeaky board. For centuries, speeches have remained the medium of choice for politicians seeking to crystallise, develop and articulate new policy ideas.

Speechwriting should be treated as more of a specialism within Whitehall, not something passed around like a grenade with the pin taken out.

In ancient Greece and renaissance Britain, rhetoric was actually part of the school curriculum. The ability to articulate oneself was seen as crucial if citizens were to play a full and active role in social and political life.



The cost of candour: Ratner's company lost millions after a poorly timed joke

Reviving rhetoric might not be top of Ed Balls' priorities, deliciously intriguing though the idea of rows of schoolchildren reciting sound-bites is, but there is clearly a need to excite and inspire a new generation of speechwriters.

The BBC is currently preparing a new 'young orator' series, challenging young speechmakers to wow the nation in an *X-Factor* format.

Within the civil service, speechwriting could be something to look forward to, not dread: a chance to rise above the maelstrom of management monotony and indulge in some exquisite creative artistry.

There's more to speechwriting than just writing speeches. At its best, speechwriting is about creating compelling narratives, imparting inspiring ideas and, ultimately of course, shifting opinions and behaviours.

This is a multidimensional talent, requiring a wide range of different skills. To illustrate this, I've developed a new 360 degree model, demonstrating that speechwriting is part art and part craft.

As far as training speechwriters is concerned, it's not enough to simply play someone a tape of Martin Luther King's 'I had a dream' sermon and then send them off to write a speech on community partnerships.

This model equips speechwriters to craft speeches which are immediately more persuasive and engaging. The model is based on practical experience and academic research, drawing together findings from ancient oratory and modern advertising.

By following the 360-degree model, speechwriters will learn the key principles of persuasion, as well as a range of wonderfully dirty tricks to trip their opponents up in argument – tricks that would make even Alistair Campbell blush. They will learn how to construct comprehensible narratives and develop gut-wrenching metaphors.

Participants will learn the detailed inner anatomy of a sound-bite so that create their own 'quotes of the day'. Crucially, they will learn how to put

this all into practice back in the workplace.

Speechwriting is one of the best jobs in the civil service. But it is peculiar. I often think of it a little like intellectual cross-dressing. You must immerse yourself completely in someone else's skin, sharing their thoughts, feelings and ideas if you are to articulate their vision.

But it is also incredibly rewarding. There is a great satisfaction not only in shaping a speech which wins hearts and minds, but in sparing a minister the utter humiliation of 'doing a Ratner'. That's something we should all be grateful for – whether we're writing, delivering or listening to the speech.

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