

Het artikel *Speech! Speech!, the language of power* van Alan Watkins geeft u meer informatie over het verschijnsel van de presentatie. Het komt uit *New Statesman*, 15 december 2008, bladzijde 32-35.

## THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

Oratory helped secure the presidency for Barack Obama and saved Gordon Brown's premiership. *Alan Watkins* explains the art of wooing the party faithful while ten distinguished commentators choose their personal favourites

### **Speech! Speech!**

People say that they remember conference speeches. What really happens later on, often long after the event, is that they remember isolated sentences, even phrases. David Steel said in September 1981: "Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government." It was not at the Liberal conference proper but at an evening rally to celebrate the inauguration of the Liberal-SDP Alliance. This is now taken as a demonstration of foolish Liberal optimism. But at the time the new Conservative government was discredited. According to the opinion polls, the Alliance looked like being the largest party. His predecessor Jo Grimond said at Brighton in the 1963 assembly (as it was called in those days) that he intended to march his troops towards the sound of gunfire. They were a notably pacific lot but were much encouraged, although the party ended up with only nine MPs in the following year's general election. Harold Wilson dominated domestic politics for over a decade. His speech on science and socialism at Scarborough in 1963 turned Labour into the optimistic party that was certain to win the election. The "white heat of the technological revolution" is inexact: the phrases were "the scientific revolution" and "the white heat of this revolution". The then deputy political correspondent of the Daily Express, later editor of the Times, Charles Douglas-Home, sitting in the gallery, rose from his seat and applauded loudly. His senior colleague sitting beside him pulled him down by his coat-tails and told him, as gently as he could, that this was no way for a political journalist to behave. Wilson has fallen out of fashion. For a whole succession of conferences, he carried the audience enthusiastically with him. He was required – or chose – to make two speeches. One was supposed to be a reply to the "parliamentary report". The other was the leader's oration. Edward Heath in opposition introduced the two-speech practice in his own party, but it was not so successful as it was with Wilson. The leader is now restricted to one big speech, and quite right, too. Even so, with Labour the speech comes halfway through the proceedings. The delegates prefer to devote the rest of the week to their hangovers; the Tory representatives are able to get their drinking done first. It is anticlimactic but Hugh Gaitskell, after all, made his "fight, fight and fight again" speech at the beginning of the conference at Scarborough in 1960. Everyone now says that Gaitskell was defending the position of the independent nuclear deterrent. In spirit, he was. But party policy at the time, on which he had fought the 1959 election, was to embrace the non-nuclear club. His opposition to the Common Market (as it then was) at Brighton in 1962 was, if anything, clearer. It was "the end of a thousand years of history". Most people have forgotten that. The other speaker who is now overlooked is Iain Macleod, though he was not disregarded then. His oratorical function, a revived Labour in opposition, was to bring comfort to the troops: "Lift up your hearts . . . the Liberals may dream their dreams. The socialists" – this pronounced with particular venom – "may scheme their schemes. We have work to do." And in 1964, the Tories nearly won.

### **Peregrine Worsthorne**

#### **Stanley Baldwin during the Westminster by-election campaign, March 1931**

Beaverbrook and Rothermere had been attacking Baldwin in a vicious campaign to remove him as leader of the Conservative Party. Baldwin's speech attempted to persuade people that we shouldn't allow tabloid newspaper owners – who are, after all, unelected officials – to determine the course

of the political debate, claiming that they were seeking "power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot through the ages".

Baldwin's words represented an absolutely deadly attack on the press barons. The speech stripped them completely naked for everyone to see and it was all the more effective because it was couched in personal terms: not as an abstraction but as a personal attack on two well-known figures. Although I was then only a schoolboy, I remember the speech very well. People never saw the proprietors in the same light again, and Baldwin's words still have relevancy. That phrase, "power without responsibility", is hung around the neck of the press barons even today. If Murdoch comes out against Brown in the next election, no doubt the phrase will be trotted out again. The speech was written by his cousin Rudyard Kipling, which explains its rhetorical power. It was unusual because Baldwin usually used very mellow, reasonable language – he very rarely adopted such aggressive phrases, unlike other great orators like Nye Bevan. He was a peacemaker. But, in this instance, he used a phrase which still reverberates today.

## **Michael Foot**

### **Aneurin Bevan on the NHS in the House of Commons, February 1948**

For about 20 years or so, Nye Bevan was the absolute master of the House of Commons. There was one particular occasion when the bill to create the National Health Service was going through the Commons. Nye as minister of health was facing opposition from the doctors in the British Medical Association and the Tories, so he challenged his opponents to a debate in the House of Commons and absolutely slayed them. It was a crucial turning point in the history of the Labour movement: the Tories thought they could destroy Nye and the whole idea of the NHS, but he saw them off. Nye was the best debater the House of Commons ever had because, as he put it, he always went for the strongest part of his opponent's argument rather than the weakest. He would describe the case for the other side and then absolutely tear it apart.

## **Vernon Bogdanor**

### **Hugh Gaitskell at Labour conference, Scarborough, October 1960**

In 1960, conference was thought to be the ultimate decision-making body of the Labour Party. Hugh Gaitskell, the party leader, faced defeat by the unilateralists, who had formed an unholy alliance with those who wanted to get rid of him because he was too right-wing. Gaitskell turned on his accusers. They had no right, he said, to undermine the autonomy of the parliamentary party. Those on the right were just as entitled to consciences as those on the left. He vowed to "fight, fight and fight again" to save the party he loved. Gaitskell lost the vote but won the argument, impressing himself on the country as a leader of courage and honesty. He would have become prime minister in 1964, probably with a majority larger than Harold Wilson's, but for his untimely death in January 1963. Gaitskell was a revisionist and a precursor of new Labour. He sought a party in thrall neither to ancient doctrines of public ownership nor to modern doctrines of unregulated markets. But social democracy is a creed permanently in need of revision. Can Gordon Brown become the Gaitskell of today, by adapting new Labour to the era of financial crisis? The future of the party depends upon the answer to this question.

## **Peter Preston**

### **Alec Douglas-Home at Conservative conference, Blackpool, October 1963**

Blackpool 1963 was my first party conference stint for the Guardian. But where was the em battled prime minister of the day, Supremac, the one in the super Profumo soup? He was ill, supposedly gravely so, in a bed far away: and his job was there for the taking. One by one the would-be Tory leaders made their big pitches, knowing they would be anointed by acclamation. But Reggie Maudling, the chancellor in the nifty suit, was a TV man: he seemed to shrink on a bare Winter Gardens stage. Rab Butler, the intellectual, the reformer, the home secretary in a crumpled suit, gave a mumbling, crumpled address. He seemed dog-tired, careworn: not the chap to revive a struggling government. That needed Lord Hailsham, the party chairman who rang bells and

bellowed easy nostrums, surely? But he overdid it, too histrionic, too much of a cartoon figure to carry the day.

So then there was none (or rather one who didn't count, the Earl of Home, a courtly, aristocratic foreign secretary with no evident electioneering skills and a frozen face). Alec Home wasn't supposed to be a contender, merely a gent. He stood there, stick thin, and told the Conservative ranks how the prime minister was faring, how they should send him all their best wishes, how they needed to be calm at this time of test.

And when it was over, on the reporting table, you knew something momentous had happened: that the Tories, in distress, would turn – absurdly, wholly unexpectedly – to a belted earl who conveyed simple integrity, simple loyalty and simple calm to them. He was the contender who never thought of the prize – and got it because he wouldn't have dreamed of competing for it. A speech without histrionics, policies or much in the way of content: but a speech where sheer old-fashioned niceness won the day briefly for a party that still thought of itself as nice.

## **Norman Lamont**

### **Keith Joseph's speech on inflation, Preston, September 1974**

This was a speech which altered the intellectual climate of British politics in a profound sense. In the period following the Second World War until the 1970s, economic policy was dominated by the view that you couldn't control inflation without political controls on prices and supply. Joseph broke the postwar consensus and argued that inflation should be controlled only by demand and money supply. Although he wasn't the only person making these arguments, his position in the mainstream of the Conservative Party made him the figurehead of a changing climate of opinion. Joseph was put under huge pressure not to make the speech and rock the boat at a sensitive time, between two elections in 1974. But he was determined the public should be told the truth as he saw it. Regretfully, I don't believe this kind of intellectually serious speech could be made today: the press simply wouldn't listen. Even at the time, Joseph was dismissed as the "Mad Monk". Yet he was absolutely dedicated to winning the argument, and, despite the mockery, the ideas contained in the speech were slowly adopted by all parties. He gave Margaret Thatcher the intellectual platform upon which to base her policies. Labour continued to denounce Joseph, but Jim Callaghan reflected his influence when he told his party that the option of spending one's way out of a recession no longer existed. He was directly echoing what Joseph had said in the speech.

## **David Marquand**

### **Roy Jenkins's 1979 Richard Dimbleby Lecture ("Home Thoughts from Abroad")**

In this speech, Jenkins broke the ultimate taboo in Labour politics at the time by hinting at the possibility of a break from the party. The effect of his call for a new "radical centre" was immense. Suddenly, he was no longer a distant figure brooding in his Brussels eyrie; he was once again a player in the hurly-burly of domestic politics. The eventual result was the Social Democratic Party breakaway from Labour two years later, and the formation of the SDP-Liberal Alliance, which almost overtook the Labour share of the vote in the 1983 general election.

But there is no way of knowing precisely what Jenkins intended when he gave this lecture. Was he determined as early as this to create a third party? I think he hoped a third party would emerge, but did not see his way clear at that stage. What finally convinced him, I believe, was the extraordinary public response to the lecture, which he could not have anticipated before he delivered it. But no one can be certain what was going on in that complex, fascinating mind. What is clear is that, in his two years as president of the European Commission, Jenkins had viewed the swing to the left in the Labour Party and the rise of the right in the Conservative Party with mounting horror. When he looked across the Channel he saw a Labour Party that seemed to be falling under the control of a militant left which hated everything he held dear, and a Conservative Party that seemed bent on tearing up the postwar settlement that had framed his political career ever since his entry into parliament in 1948. As he watched all this from afar, I think he felt guilty that he hadn't done more to resist the rise of the far left in Labour while he was still at Westminster and gradually came to believe that it was his duty to fight for his values, if necessary by breaking with the party. The

"Home Thoughts from Abroad" lecture was a signal that he was now prepared to do this – a toe dipped in the water to see how much support he would gather.

## **Anthony Howard**

### **Neil Kinnock on Militant, 1985 Labour conference, Bournemouth**

Contrary to popular orthodoxy, party splits can sometimes work in favour of the leader. In the aftermath of the miners' strike and the increasing influence of the Militant Tendency, the 1985 Labour conference should have been a disaster for Neil Kinnock (pictured right), but he turned it into an opportunity to take on the extremists in his party and increase his stature in the nation at large. Kinnock gave off a powerful impression of strength by presenting himself as a Daniel in the lions' den figure, denouncing a Labour council in Liverpool that was "hiring taxis to scuttle around a city handing out redundancy notices to its own workers", as he put it. In truth, the Labour delegates weren't Kinnock's intended audience: he was appealing beyond the conference hall to the public watching the speech at home. He was presenting himself as a figure willing to sacrifice his popularity among his party's left wing in favour of the national interest. Although Labour lost the next election, Kinnock's speech altered the lay of the land in British politics; David Owen later told me that he knew the SDP was done for after watching this speech.

## **Peter Jay**

### **Neil Kinnock on Militant**

Hugh Gaitskell was in a league completely above everyone else, but after him Neil Kinnock was a great speaker.

The stuff about Kinnock being a windbag is just claptrap. He spoke with a great deal of passion and insight, and I think his speech against the Militant Tendency in 1985 was extraordinarily courageous. There have been unfortunately few occasions when major Labour figures have taken on the knee-jerk reflexes of their party and said straight from the shoulder that what was being said was crap. I wasn't at the conference myself – I have always agreed with my father, a Labour MP, who warned that there are no experiences more horrific and disagreeable than a Labour conference – but, watching from afar, one could see it was a definitive moment in the history of the party. The speech profoundly influenced perceptions of Kinnock by those outside the political bubble, making a much wider audience aware that he had the courage and determination to stand up to the loony left, whereas so many Labour leaders had been beholden to it. More than Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, he completed the process, begun by Hugh Gaitskell, of making Labour fit for government. For whatever reason, he didn't personally achieve that, but he turned a corner in making the Labour Party palatable to the British public.

## **Edwina Currie**

### **Margaret Thatcher in the House of Commons, October 1990**

I heard Margaret Thatcher make her "No, no, no" speech in response to the vision of an integrated Europe put forward by Jacques Delors and the European Commission. It was her statement to the House after she came back from the Italian Euro summit in the latter part of 1990. She was not too impressed with the Italians, to say the least, and she was handbagging everyone in sight. It was a real tub-thumping speech, quite literally – she was banging on the Despatch Box as she spoke, and I thought she might break a nail. And it galvanised the Tory party in the days when the Tories were the pro-European party and Labour were Little Englanders.

However, the speech led directly to the leadership challenge by Sir Geoffrey Howe. He had been her foreign secretary and her chancellor, and they had fallen out. Soon after the speech, Geoffrey stood up in the House and denounced her, and on 1 November he resigned. That led directly to the challenge and then to her defeat.

Thatcher's speech was part of the discussion which eventually led to the Maastricht Treaty, with all the far-reaching consequences that had. At the time the speech was very warmly received, but those of us who were pro-European were sitting on the bench thinking, "No, Margaret, this time you have gone too far."

## **Shirley Williams**

### **John Major in the Downing Street rose garden, June 1995**

The parallels between John Major's situation in 1995 and Gordon Brown's in the summer are extraordinary: Major was right down in the polls, subject to constant leadership speculation in the press and facing disloyalty from his cabinet. On his way to the G7 summit at Halifax, Nova Scotia, he was suffering from the most terrible backache, but he was loath to make it public because he was terrified of the inevitable headline: "Major's got a pain in the neck". So I think when he came back from the G7 he finally decided that he could take it no more.

When the press were called into the Downing Street rose garden he took absolutely everyone by surprise by telling them he was putting his leadership on the line to reassert his authority. "In short," he told the media, "it is time to put up or shut up." Major's actions gave him his first favourable press coverage for years, and of course he won the subsequent leadership election. Although the Tories were doomed to electoral wipeout in 1997, he managed to hold the party together over the next two years at least.

Suffering from acute physical pain and fed up with the endless backbiting in the press, he had gone beyond calculating the political risks of his actions and didn't care whether he won or lost. It was a courageous measure in desperate times which contains a lesson for the current resident of No 10.

*Interviews by Ed Hancox*