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David Miliband, MP and former Foreign Secretary

The **art.** *of* **Speeches** *and* **Presentations**

The secrets of making people
remember what you say

Philip Collins

Former speechwriter to Tony Blair

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Speeches
and
Presentations

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A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2012
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Registered office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Collins, Philip, 1967–

The art of speeches and presentations : the secrets of making people remember what you say / Philip Collins.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-470-71184-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Public speaking. I. Title.

PN4129.15.C63 2012

2012004083

808.5'1–dc23

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-470-71184-2 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-470-71194-1 (ebk)

ISBN 978-0-470-71195-8 (ebk) ISBN 978-0-470-71193-4 (ebk)

Set in 11.5/15 Adobe Caslon Pro-Regular by Toppan Best-Set Premedia Limited, Hong Kong

Printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall, UK

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*To Hari and Mani, who are already teaching
me about the art of argument*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My professional thanks are due to three sets of people. First, my colleagues in Downing Street where I had the privilege of being able to enact everything I had learnt about writing a speech for the Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

Second, great thanks are due to *The Times*, whose generosity as an employer has allowed me the time off my duties there to write this book. I also owe a debt of thanks to *The Times* for granting me the space to analyse prominent speeches in its pages. It's a privilege to do so and the interest that these pieces have generated shows that rhetoric continues to fascinate people.

Third, to Brendan Barnes and the team at Speakers for Business who have helped to put together the speech-writing symposium at which I have tested the ideas contained in this book. My thanks are due to the people who came to

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

those classes, for their stimulating thoughts and responses. For research assistance, my great thanks to Claudia Wood.

My personal debt of gratitude is much greater. Suffice to say that it is owed to an extended family but most of all to Geeta, Hari and Mani.

INTRODUCTION: ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Strange Isolation

A man steps forward out of the dark, alone, trailed by a spotlight. He walks slowly towards the podium which is the only thing that decorates the otherwise naked stage. He is being watched, not just by the two thousand people in the auditorium, all of whom are gripped by excitement, but by millions more watching as the event is broadcast live on television.

He walks into a strange isolation, for he knows, as does his audience, that he is about to beg their undivided attention for at least 25 minutes, probably more. There is no other setting in which we permit anyone to speak, uninterrupted, for so long. Yet this is precisely the exchange that we, as audience members, have licensed by our presence in the auditorium.

Some part of the audience is inquisitive, hoping to learn something; some part is sceptical, reluctant to be persuaded; and some part is eager, hoping to be inspired. Then there are audience members who are already bored, hoping, but not expecting, merely to hear something that retains their attention. Interest groups or rival firms or jealous colleagues are all paying particular mind, hopeful that the event will yield some advantage to their cause, even if that means you falling flat on your face, which will at least be amusing.

Soon enough, either simultaneous with delivery or very soon afterwards, the address will be enmeshed in a web of different technologies. If it is a major speech, it will be cut up and analysed for the news bulletins on television. It will be written up selectively for the newspapers the following

morning. There may be a sketch of the speech, in which the writer picks out the one aspect that has gone wrong or is easily lampooned. Although the days in which speeches were published verbatim, without commentary, have gone for good, the speech may even be analysed in some depth with the best and worst passages highlighted and scrutinized.

Even if the occasion is not one that warrants the attention of the nation, it will rapidly be found in other contexts. The days when the speech existed solely as a transaction between the speaker and those in the audience are largely past. A transcript of the speech will probably be made available on an intranet, where the occasion will no doubt be broadcast. If it is not broadcast in real time, a recording of the occasion, certainly aural and probably visual, will be loaded onto the website later to the rest of the company sitting at their desks. Many speeches are multi-media events at the moment they occur. A transcript of the text may be circulated to members of an extensive corporate email distribution list.

And yet, for all the splicing that occurs in modern media, this event also retains the aura it has had since the first orator stood before the Athenian polis and tried out the trick of repetition. Perhaps the source of the fear that afflicts so many people as they contemplate speaking in public is an echo of the essentially primitive nature of the transaction. This is communication, to put it in modern parlance, which is one to many, and the last instance of the public speech will, in that sense, be the same as the first. In that loneliness, we can also find the perennial, visceral attraction of the moment.

The speech you are about to perform is therefore an echo of similar events held thousands of years before. It is hard to think of any other mode of communication that is essentially

unchanged down the ages. The technological means of transmission is, at once, simple and sophisticated – the medium of speech. Let's go back to that man who is walking onto a stage. He approaches the podium where he stops, clears his throat and starts to speak. The normal rules of conversation are about to be suspended for the time it takes him to expound his argument. Against all the expectations and regular predictions of its demise, public speech still counts. It always will and it is a skill that needs to be mastered.

Speeches Still Matter

Open any anthology of great speeches and the chances are you will encounter a familiar litany (a selection of good anthologies can be found in the Bibliography at the end of this book). There are many speeches that feature in every one. They define the landscape of the tiny fraction of public oratory that we recall. Mahatma Gandhi's "There is no salvation for India" from 1916, Franklin D. Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" (1933), Winston Churchill's masterpieces in the House of Commons from the depths of 1940, John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ." (1961), Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" (1963) and Nelson Mandela's "An ideal for which I am prepared to die . . ." (1964) are staples of the anthologies among modern speeches.

These are all in their way unique speeches, crafted and fashioned for the occasion by skilful writers. It is easy to suppose that they treat subjects long gone, that they are distant arguments whose eloquence remains, like a monument, even as

their relevance fades. Martin Luther King Junior's masterly preaching during the March on Washington DC in 1963. John F. Kennedy's great inaugural chiasmus ("Think not what your country can do for you"). Winston Churchill's memorable description of the effect of Communism after the war ("An iron curtain has descended"), which cast a shadow over the victory presaged in his justly famous war-time speeches, which are themselves exemplars of cohesion and economy.

But these speeches are more than the beautiful but ruined architecture that is a legacy of a lost age. They are still alive and they speak to us still. Pick up an anthology and enjoy the skill with which the words are crafted, the way the argument flows and vivid pictures form.

The continuing power of beautiful speech has recently had a powerful new testament. Barack Obama was carried to the Presidency of the United States on a tide of elevated rhetoric. Obama proved again what ought not to need proving – that clear prose in a poetic form still has the capacity to move an audience, both to tears and to action. Of course, the hopes that Obama excited in the process of rhetorical inspiration may yet give way to betrayal and disappointment.

That ambiguity is buried deep in rhetoric from the start. The popular connotation that words are "just rhetoric" suggests a duplicity at its centre. This accusation has a classical heritage. It was first levelled by Aristophanes in a celebrated passage in his play *The Clouds* in which he takes Plato to task for the fake nature of the words he uses as persuasion. This is a reminder that rhetoric is, after all, only words. Resolution must not lose the name of action; deeds will need to follow. We will find, as we proceed through the manual of writing

a good speech, that this is an important principle. In learning how to speak we need constantly to attend to what we want people subsequently to do.

But it does not do to be too churlish or too much of a purist. There is always something enjoyable about hearing a great speaker convey a persuasive argument. Brilliance is a joy to behold. In these days of the easy availability of the great speeches, there is pleasure to be had in experiencing the mesmerizing effect that a great speaker, and Obama is an unquestionably great speaker, can conjure out of the rhythm of the words on the page.

The Importance of Not Being Barack Obama

But, if President Obama has helped to revive interest in the speech as an art form, he may be a bad guide to it. “All I have is a voice,” said Auden and, much more than his text, Obama has a great voice with echoes of the black churches. Not everyone can sing a speech like President Obama can. Try the following experiment. Print out the texts of Martin Luther King’s great “I have a dream” speech. Then print out the speech that Barack Obama gave on the occasion of his inauguration as President of the United States of America. Then perform them for yourself. You can hear the cadences if you are alone but, if you are not too embarrassed to do it, try to persuade someone to listen with you. Or, better still, get them to deliver the speech and you listen.

I am sure you will find that the King speech sounds pretty good. You might not have the lilt that he gives the words

but you will notice that the music is in the writing as much as in the speaking. It is hard not to deliver this speech in a sonorous way. The biblical imagery and archaisms more or less summon a command performance, even in your living room.

Then read the Obama speech. I'm just as sure you'll have far greater difficulty in making the rhetoric soar. The music is not intrinsic in the writing in the way it is in the timeless prose of the King James Authorised Version of the Bible, the only good book ever written by committee (of which more later). Read out by you, as you wander around your house, the Obama text sounds flat and at times rather dull. You begin to realize just how good Barack Obama is, as a performer. He has the ability to find the melody in his own words.

There is a second, even more intractable, way in which you are not Barack Obama. I suppose it is feasible you might learn to sing like he can. But no matter how well you train your voice, I am on safe ground when I predict that you are not currently the President of the United States of America and nor are you likely to be any time soon. The pressing questions that will assert themselves in your working life are unlikely to possess the grandeur of those which concern the leader of the free world. A speech about the attempt to establish universal health care, free at the point of delivery, is a major moment in American life. It warrants the use of the grand style and you cannot manufacture this pathos.

The context and occasion provide the grandeur, not the writer or the speaker. There is not a lot you can do about

your context apart from accept it. The context in this case is that when you consider that Barack Obama is the first black man to be president in a country which, within the living memory of a large segment of the electorate, practised segregation in its cities, and, not long before that, transported black men to its shores in chains, then you have the raw material for some great speeches.

This isn't quite as true when you have to do a presentation on the quarterly sales figures to the senior management team who have gathered in a Travelodge somewhere off the Towcester ring road. It is not likely, as you make your way to the make-shift stage, that you are anticipating a slot in the next anthology of all-time great speeches. You probably think that just getting through the day without making a fool of yourself will do. You have to be more ambitious than that. You do have a specific purpose, which is to bind the team and inform them of the new, improved corporate strategy.

But the point is that it is crucial to get the register of a speech right. If you reach for poetry when the audience simply wants a clear account of the figures you will look and sound ridiculous.

This applies even to the best. As David Cannadine points out in his introduction to *Winston Churchill: Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: The Great Speeches*, Churchill had spent most of his career lavishing his verbal gifts on subjects that were not large enough to bear the weight. He had gained a reputation for verbosity and for being neither entirely serious nor entirely sincere. Churchill's early career is, in fact, an object lesson in what happens if you let the rhetoric run out of control. It was only with the failure of appeasement, the

outbreak of war and imminent threat to British freedom that Churchill's words turned from bombast to brilliance.

The Purpose of this Book

Modern business cannot be conducted without effective public speech. Global technologies threaten to close the distance between locations but the importance of the clear presentation, done in front of a small audience in a given location, is still vital. It may now be web-cast, it may now reach an audience that would have been unimaginable a generation ago but clear speech is more necessary than ever.

It is also still true that speaking in public incites fear in far more people than it needs to. This book is designed to counteract that fear. It is written on the assumption that if people were more confident about the material they had in front of them, then they might be less fearful of delivering it. The central argument of this book is that you need to have a clear central argument, and this book is designed to assist you primarily in the task of working out what you want to say and how to say it well.

Some orators manage to say a lot without ever quite knowing what they are talking about. Churchill once described bad orators as people who: "before they get up they do not know what they are saying; and when they have sat down, they do not know what they have said".

It follows, accordingly, that there are several related types of book that this is not. It is not another anthology of great speeches. There is a voluminous literature on great speeches. A great deal of analysis has been lavished on why those

speeches have survived the cruel test of time. There are some excellent guides to the technical aspects of rhetoric, which take you through the many tricks of the trade and introduce you to the classical language of rhetoric. This book isn't an attempt to rewrite those books, not least because that task has already been done very well. For example, the books by Sam Leith, *You Talkin' to Me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama*, and Jay Heinrichs, *Thank You for Arguing*, both provide slightly more formal, but highly accessible, introductions to the classical techniques. But, as instruction manuals, the lessons in the art of persuasion are a little more buried than you might require, with that date in the diary pressing. This book is deliberately intended to be more immediately practical. It is also possible to write and speak well, obeying the dictates of classical technique, without necessarily knowing the name of every trick. For those who do wish to show off by naming the techniques they are using, there is a glossary at the back of this book.

There is a third type of book that this is not. There is also a huge choice, in any bookshop, for anyone seeking tips on how to present their material. Many of these books are full of wisdom and I recommend you seek some of them out. I would suggest that you look, in particular, at Graham Davies's *The Presentation Coach*, the final chapters of which set out some excellent tips on how to make the most of your material once you are up there on your own, ready to speak. Though the final substantive chapter of this book is about the delivery of the speech, as it is impossible to be comprehensive without considering the way that good delivery can enhance your material, the primary focus is on what happens before you arrive on stage.