

CoR Workshop 1: The State of Speech (13th September 2017)

Queen Mary, University of London (local host: Professor Chris Reid)

Executive summary

The workshop was concerned with recording and learning from the experiences of speechwriters and speechmakers. Key points can be grouped under three headings.

Crisis, What Crisis?

When it came to the question of whether or not there is a ‘crisis’ of political speech there was no single answer but some overlap.

One speechwriter argued that there is a crisis but that it is rooted in a wider crisis of the democratic political system. People are losing faith in the slow political process and therefore seek politicians who go against this process (seeming outsiders with a populist anti-establishment rhetoric). One cause of the crisis is that so many of the things which politicians might speak about, they are also powerless to address. **Great speeches convert suffering to purpose or virtue, taking the form of melodrama. The lyrical content of past speeches has been replaced by more technical content as a result of democratic progress.**

Another speechwriter observed that **some politicians are afraid of words**, which hampers their ability to communicate effectively. The desire to have a speech reported can inadvertently corrupt the content but, conversely, some speeches are written with the deliberate intention that they not be reported.

A politician argued that there has never been a Golden Age of politics, but that it is the case that there are now fewer real orators in politics. Of those attracted to a career in politics, very few are really politicians or take the craft of politics seriously, and far too few seem to like people.

Craft, What Craft?

A topic that emerged was the extent to which speechwriting is a singular craft and, if so, what that craft is.

For one speechwriter rhetoric and oratory (as Cicero explained) are **forms of statecraft** as is speechwriting. It is beneficial when embedded within the political process and well-crafted speeches can give definition to key moments in history. It was argued that a speech is most inspiring when a person with an authoritative background or *ethos* speaks about a problem which he/she can actually influence or solve. Vice versa, a speech works less well when not tailored to the ethos of the speaker or the speaker does not have enough power to change the situation addressed.

A politician explained that Ministers need to learn how to deliver different kinds of speeches for a variety of political forums, such as the House of Commons, Select Committees, and conferences. Yet Parties and Parliament provide little to no training in how to write or deliver a speech and presentational training is not really offered other than for those at the very top.

Methods of speechwriting vary. Some speechwriters write copious content and then cut it down, and others build up from the central argument. Political speechwriters working with top politicians have to engage with a team of people surrounding the politician. When crafting a speech, the speechwriter has to act as an editor, keeping differing influences in balance, before making him-/herself invisible so that the politician can speak as if with their own voice. The politician thought that speeches are best when speechwriters are fully embedded as part of the team and there throughout the whole process of creating a speech.

Another speechwriter suggested that **performance is no longer valued by politicians and content is seen as more important**. It was suggested that there is scope for training for politicians in how to project a speech. Some prominent politicians do worry about their performance and hire advisers – such as theatre directors – to help them.

It also emerged that speechwriters need to be fast learners. There is no standard civil service training for the role and one speechwriter remarked on the surprise of other Westminster staff that there were books in his office which could be consulted when writing speeches.

Two speechwriters noted that speechwriters do not often think of the impact of their speeches or follow up on what the content of the speech has achieved. **Speeches are perceived as a one-off occasion to make an announcement and are not viewed as part of an ongoing process.**

Who, What, Why and How?

In many ministries speeches are intended for specific interest groups, a specialist press and vocal lobby groups. It was noted that speeches to such groups are often the only times these audiences ever meet a politician, and therefore the politicians have to get it right. But ministers may be required to arrange such speeches around a set piece of wording – an announcement that the government wants to get out. This can dominate the occasion.

When ministers accept (or are given by their superiors) a speech invitation then, with policy officials, they plan the event and messages. The press office and a speechwriter would be present at the first meeting rather than the later but most often the work of the policy officer was enough, the speaker would rewrite the speech and possibly extemporise in delivery.

The speechwriters explained that some politicians prefer to write speeches themselves, others have long periods of consultation. Consultation on a speech involves the speechwriter, the policy team, and the Minister. Some Ministers prefer to work with a speechwriter on fleshing out a speech from the basic spine of the argument, others provide a broad overview. Consultation between the Minister and speechwriter can help capture the individual voice of the Minister within speeches. Some speeches emerge from intensive collaboration between the speechwriter and policy team, but others are constructed by a committee of people, which is an ineffective and overthought process. Speechwriting by committee can be a hindrance to good speeches as policy teams stick to formulas, speechwriters focus on language, and politicians want to find a medium between the two. Speeches can be negotiated up to the last minute, which can prove stressful especially when dealing with a controversial policy issue.

It was noted that in the case of international political forums, language in speeches has to be kept simple for translational purposes.

There was discussion of influences and it emerged that American speechwriters influence British speechwriters and vice versa. It was noted that one difference when it comes to appealing to the two nations was that the UK public do not know who they are, whereas the US public are told who they should be.

Further Questions:

Some specific topics for discussion in the 'Crisis of Rhetoric' network were raised by the speakers:

- The ways in which the art and skill of speechmaking vary at different levels within politics;
- The models of speech that work in different environments;
- What would help in writing speeches for politicians – including performance and authenticity;
- What prohibits politicians from thinking about the audiences that are listening;
- The extent to which writers and speakers need to understand the genre of speech (deliberative or epideictic);
- The need for education in good rhetoric and argument at all levels from school to university and beyond;
- The wider role of rhetoric in society and how that affects political speech;
- The varied definitions of 'rhetoric' and the specific definition of rhetoric in politics.

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