

**THE LOST ART OF ORATORY**  
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On the matter of oratory, it's my impression that all is not lost, but it has certainly changed.

When Pericles gave his famous funeral oration to all the citizens of Athens - citizens in 431 BC, he probably addressed 30,000 people in all. That's less than the size of the ANZ Bank.

For hundreds of years oratory was a form of public entertainment and instruction. People had leisure time, but not a lot to do with it, and so speeches were long, florid, baggy. Today we wouldn't have the patience.

Widespread literacy changed things. In 1863, the most noted orator of the day, Edward Everett, delivered a funeral oration more than two hours long. President Abraham Lincoln stepped up and spoke for less than three minutes, and the crowds booed his brevity.

It was only when the papers came out the next day that everyone realised that this was a famous speech. The Gettysburg Address was a turning point in the Civil War: *This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.* Print and education had established a new mode of reception for speeches.

Radio changed the equation again. Between 1933 and 1944 President Franklin D Roosevelt delivered his fireside chats - he sat by the fire, and Americans sat by their radios to hear him. Churchill's great speeches were designed for radio. Some years ago I went to the National Museum of Australia and heard some of Ben Chifley's recorded speeches. Radio is so friendly that through the crackle it sounded as though Chiffers commenced his talks with the greeting, *Hullo Citizens!* I was slightly disappointed when I listened again and realised it was in fact, *Fellow Citizens.*

Now we are in the age of TV, a visual age, and we have reverted to oratory as a form of spectacle. I think Queen Elizabeth the 1<sup>st</sup> would have loved TV - pancake makeup, great frocks, white horses on a windswept coast: her Majesty knew all about putting on a show for the people. And she knew how to give great speeches.

Today we have Kevin Rudd upstaging Alexander Downer and welcoming Chinese Premier Hu to Australia in fluent Chinese: most of us hadn't the faintest idea what he was saying, but we all knew this was a grand moment.

And then his Sorry speech - powerful itself, but reinforced by the theatre - the presence of the Stolen Generation members, the welcome to country and so on.

Another example, perhaps not as well known. In 1996, John Howard addressed the gun lobby in Victoria. Against the advice of his security detail he stood up - in front of 3,000 bullet-loving individuals - and told them he was taking away their semi-automatic guns. Not a word remembered, but good policy, and a brave moment.

When the great ancient Roman Cicero wrote his handbook, *On Oratory*, he argued that an orator should know everything - maths, science, history, art, the whole of the common law, politics. Now it's impossible. The talkative polymath is no more, and we are in the age of the expert.

Not only that, democratic Governments have receded from large areas of civic life: they no longer control all aspects of our economy and society. Which is one reason why last week, just 919,000 people watched Wayne Swan deliver the first budget of a new Labor Government. That's fewer than 5 percent of the Australian population - more people watched *The Simpsons*.

Meanwhile we have an explosion of speeches outside the government sphere. Sydney alone has several speakers' bureaux touting the services of sportsmen, adventurer's and raconteurs. The business community is a whirl of lunch and dinner speeches - what would the Fin Review do without them? Every year dozens of Australian business people make the pilgrimage to Davos to hear themselves speak. There seems to be an explosion in self-help orators touting the secrets to happiness to paying customers.

And, god help us, even writer's festivals are now oratory festivals. Where anyone got the idea that writers should be invited to give speeches I don't know, but I'm grateful.

And here is where my own experience comes in because I am a jobbing speechwriter. I've written and edited speeches for Ministers, for business leaders, for the millionaire owner of a waste disposal firm, and for my father who finds himself too often nowadays called upon to deliver funeral orations.

The job of speechwriting is both wonderful and weird.

Peggy Noonan was the best of Ronald Reagan's speechwriters, but she didn't even meet the President until she had been writing for him for months. One of the chapters in her speechwriting memoir is titled: *I first saw him as a foot*. Like a lot of actors, Reagan didn't think much of writers. He thought it was all in the delivery. So much for Shakespeare.

No one has conveyed the self-pity of a speech-writer more powerfully than Don Watson in his *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart*, ostensibly a portrait of Paul Keating but in fact the portrait of the lonely genius toiling 'til dawn, trudging through the Canberra frost to deliver his latest masterpiece, while all around him the government goes to hell. Ironic, this, when you consider that Don is Australia's most celebrated speechwriter after Graham.

Then there is the nightmarish view that speechwriting is a form of public relations.

The horror of this idea to a true speechwriter is summed up by a golden moment in the TV series *The West Wing* when a low rent, ethically dubious PR guy from NASA sidles up to high-minded presidential speechwriter Sam Seaborn and says smugly: *We're both writers, heh?* To which the magnificent Sam replies haughtily: *That's only if you broaden the definition of 'writers' to people who can spell*. I've been longing to use that line.

In the beginning was the word, and, as far as oratory is concerned, in the end was the word as well.

Most of the time in modern life we interrupt each other, we rarely let anyone get to the end of a thought, let alone an argument. A speech is still one of the few opportunities left for sustained thought. For reason to unfold, step by logical step. And there's such power in this.

There is nothing more phony - or embarrassing - than a speech-giver actively trying to whip up his own emotions in order to affect yours. *Hello, Brendan Nelson.*

I think of speeches in the modern era as falling into two categories : the mirror or the spur. The mirror is the Sorry speech, or the Redfern address, or Don Watson's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier speech - when the orator holds up a mirror to our deep collective feelings and finds an outlet for them.

Here in Australia, we luckily have less need for the spur - Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> or Churchill telling the English that they must fight on and never surrender. *Victory or death!* is quite a tough message to sell but makes for great speeches.

And at their best, speeches do change the world. They create a shared understanding. They enlarge, and inform, provoke and inspire.

But it's never easy. Along the way decisions must be made about style, tone and pitch, about the ultimate audience, about the speech as part of a continuum of communications.

The basics can be more important than you'd think. Even the consummately articulate John Menadue discovered this when he became CEO of Qantas in the '70s. In his memoir *Things you Learn along the Way* he wrote: *I also worked hard on communications with staff, whether it was one-on-one, on board the aircraft or at mass meetings in the Mascot hangers. I tried to explain to them the problems we faced, how we needed to change and be more efficient so we could compete with Singapore Airlines and Cathay Pacific. It wasn't all straightforward. After a "CEO Presentation" to the multicultural staff in the catering centre, I was asked by a woman from a non-English speaking background, 'Who are you and what do you do?'*

To conclude there is still plenty of oratory around. And it's still a craft and an art and I believe, an ethical act - a statement of belief or remembrance, of intent or persuasion, and as Cicero said, the art which flourishes above the rest in every free nation - free individuals speaking their minds in a free society.

It's just that it's changing with the times and technology.