

TALKING TO THE PEOPLE: REVITALISING THE LANGUAGE OF DEMOCRACY

Speech by Tony Spencer-Smith, Editor Group, on March 16 2005 at the *Public Affairs in the Public Sector* conference in Sydney

Let me begin by quoting Robert Louis Stevenson: “There are two duties incumbent upon any man who enters on the business of writing: truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment.”

This conference is a forum for public affairs professionals who want to do their jobs better. It will overwhelmingly deal with the nitty gritty of communication in public affairs; with case studies and media relations and PR measurement.

I am a writer concerned about the health of my society, so I am going to try to look at the big picture of the role of communication in society and government, and whether there is cause for concern about the standards of that communication.

Words are central to my whole career – I am a writing trainer and novelist, and a former newspaper journalist and magazine editor – and I believe words are still the very lifeblood of any society. So they will be the focus of my analysis.

By the way, brace yourself for half an hour of solid words, except for a brief video clip of a squirming politician. Oh, and there will be a few background slides, but you’re not going to see a single set of bullet points. That way, perhaps you won’t feel you’re being shot at!

PowerPoint is very useful in many ways. I use it in my writing courses, because I can present a lot of material in a very manageable form and print it out as well. But there are some very serious concerns about the effect of too much PowerPoint on the quality of our thinking and communication.

The foremost critic of PowerPoint is Edward Tufte of Yale University, who wrote a famous attack on it a few years ago.

As he says, this method of presenting information has become ubiquitous in business and government. The problem, as he sees it, is that breaking everything up into bulleted lists is a sort of fake analytical technique. By using it, a speaker can bypass his responsibility to tie the information together and present a coherent argument.

“PowerPoint presentations”, he wrote in *Wired*, “too often resemble a school play – very loud, very slow and very simple.”

I share Tufte's concern. I think that endlessly breaking information into lists often chops up our chain of thought, prevents us from building up a proper chain of reasoning. Too frequently, the bullets blast away the meaning.

A very concrete example of this was reported in *The New York Times* in 2003. The paper's story was based on the report by the NASA Columbia Accident Prevention Board on the space shuttle crash.

The paper stated: "As expected, the ship's foam insulation was the main cause of the disaster. But the board also fingered another unusual culprit: PowerPoint...."

"NASA, the board argued, had become too reliant on presenting complex information via PowerPoint, instead of by means of traditional ink-and-paper technical reports. When NASA engineers assessed possible wing damage during the mission, they presented the findings in a confusing PowerPoint slide – so crammed with nested bullet points and irregular short forms that it was nearly impossible to untangle. 'It is easy to understand how a senior manager might read this PowerPoint slide and not realise that it addresses a life-threatening situation,' the board sternly noted."

Anyway enough of that side swipe – or perhaps I should say slide swipe – let's get straight on to looking at the state of public language, government style.

Let's start by counting our blessings. We live in a modern democracy, and how lucky we are that this is so. Most people in Australia have little perception of just what it would be like to live in a dictatorship, to live in fear of the midnight knock on the door for simply having said something a regime did not like.

As my accent will have made clear to you, I come from South Africa. I worked on newspapers in the apartheid years, and through the rollercoaster of the period leading up to independence. I was on the news desk of a daily newspaper in Cape Town when Nelson Mandela was finally released from jail and spoke to a vast crowd in the centre of the city.

So I have lived through the lows and highs of a nation racked by tyranny and then heaving itself into democracy. I have had a friend blown to bits by a parcel bomb, and seen another flee to London where he became an Oscar-winning film director.

Australia can indeed be proud of the stable, relaxed, prosperous society it has built. But be aware that here, even here, democracy is a complex and fragile thing. To work well, it needs constant attention. It can easily start sliding towards intolerance.

Very stupid decisions can be made if people are not truly informed about the facts and the issues. And the only way they can be informed is through verbal communication.

To analyse the health of our democracy, we need to take the temperature of our use of language in the public sector, because it is only through language that we can have the sort of robust debate which leads to wise decisions.

To take that communication temperature, we need to ask a number of questions. When the government talks to the people, does it speak clearly and forthrightly? Does it listen to the response? And is the debate both subtle and passionate? Does it inspire us or deaden our minds? And if there are problems, what can be done to put them right?

George Orwell first raised the alarm about public language in 1946 in his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*.

He wrote: “As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.”

Orwell’s central thesis is that the clumsy and careless use of language is not just of importance to language stylists and pedants; it debases the whole political process.

The problem of excessively abstract and clichéd language has unfortunately not gone away. It has got worse. The level of concern about this is shown by the fact that Don Watson’s 2003 book *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* has become a bestseller.

As he so aptly demonstrates in that book, we live in the age of the buzz word and the empty phrase. The jargon of management and marketing has spread into the world of politics

Watson writes: “Even if the organisational principles of management or marketing were so widely appropriate, it is by no means certain that their language is. Marketing, for instance, has no particular concern with truth. Management concerns are relatively narrow – relative, that is, to life, knowledge and possibility...In addition their language lacks almost everything needed to put in words an opinion or an emotion; to explain the complex, paradoxical or uncertain; to tell a joke.”

John Humphrys, one of Britain’s top journalists – he has reported from all over the world for the BBC and currently presents Radio 4’s *Today* program and BBC2’s *Mastermind* – agrees with Watson.

In his recently published book *Lost for Words*, he writes: “Politicians do have a defence of sorts for the increasingly dreary (and often incomprehensible) nature of their language...The state has grown over the centuries and now ministers run vast departments that influence almost every aspect of our lives...The effect of this is that ministers have had to become managers. And the deadly virus of management-speak has infected their language.”

You know the sort of thing Humphrys is talking about. They’re the sort of words and phrases bandied about the workplace all the time – and increasingly clogging the voice of government.

Humphrys tells how he once interviewed the man who runs Britain’s Inland Revenue. “He referred to taxpayers as customers. Excellent, I said, in that case I shall take my business elsewhere. Will that be okay? He said no, it would not.”

A recent survey of 150 senior executives from some of America’s top 1,000 companies came up with the most-hated buzzwords. These included at the end of the day, solution, thinking outside the box, paradigm, metrics, core competency and my personal pet hate, value-added.

These compulsive verbal tics are compounded by a tendency to be unduly abstract. You know, sentences like: “England anticipates that as regards the current emergency personnel will face up to the issues and exercise appropriately the functions allocated to their respective occupation groups.”

That is a rather wicked bureaucratic paraphrase of Lord Nelson’s famous signal at Trafalgar: “England expects every man to do his duty.” One wonders if there would be any English language to be concerned about if he had tried to call his men to arms with the bureaucratic version!

Bad language habits can sour the communication process. How is anybody going to understand the rules of society, let alone feel part of the democratic process, if they have to wade through the sort of lifeless word salad frequently dished up to them?

Things begin to get more sinister when this sort of language is used deliberately to befuddle, confuse or downright mislead; which is where spin comes in.

Seeing I’m talking about plain speaking, let me do a bit of that right now. There have been some cases in Australia in the last few years when political truths seem, to many members of the electorate, to have been spun into downright lies. For instance many ordinary, well-meaning voters believe they have been lied to by the government about refugees and the war in Iraq.

Forget whether we have actually been lied to or not. That’s the way they feel, and this is a serious matter when one considers how important trust is to any democracy, to our Australian democracy.

This is not a speech about lying. It is about the more subtle effects of spin doctoring, which can often be damaging enough to the political process.

The basic problem is this: a desire to control the truth rather than to tell it. And when it comes to political debate, this is often stifling.

Picture a politician and a voter alone in a room. They are talking about important issues, arguing back and forth, hopefully developing a more sophisticated understanding in the process.

Then a third person enters. The politician and the newcomer talk in whispers. From then on, the politician never speaks directly to the voter. He whispers to the stranger, who then gives out a non-committal and complex version of what he has just been told. The voter tries to get to talk to the politician directly, but the third party gets in the way. In the end the voter makes a rude gesture and walks out of the room.

Now we all know who that third party is. Just a communications professional doing his or her job, of course.

The process doesn't always work like this. Sometimes, heaven forbid, the politician or bureaucrat has to talk directly to the people or at least the media.

Say he has to deal with a complex issue, with many valid differing viewpoints. Does he go bravely before the cameras eager to speak his mind, inspire and lead? No, he first huddles with a bunch of people who tell him what to say.

Writes Watson: "Our leaders are primed to insert the ...grab or sound-bite, regardless of the consequences for language, coherence or self-respect...The result is that people of ordinary intelligence notice something unnatural in their gestures and something distracted in their expression, because the politician can't hide the fact that he's waiting for the chance to say what he's been primed to say, and when he gets that chance he jumps at it with unnatural haste."

Sometimes, the politician hasn't been primed at all; he's simply handed a speech written by civil servants and is so busy he scarcely gets a chance to read it beforehand.

Humphrys writes: "I have sat next to them in the front row while they are waiting to be introduced. They scan the words they are expected to deliver with conviction and they groan. Sometimes they will mutter, very quietly, 'This is crap!' Occasionally a brave or foolhardy minister – or someone who knows he is in for the chop in the next reshuffle and has nothing to lose – will throw it away and deliver a few words of his own. Mostly they just read aloud the turgid stuff which has been prepared for them."

The common problem in all this is the gap between the person who is supposed to be saying things, and the people who are listening. It is like the time lapse system used in broadcasting to stop rude words getting an airing. Except here it is raw truth that is being kept under wraps.

In that gap, all sorts of things happen. Focus groups are called in, urgent strategy meetings are held, key messages are formulated. Every attempt is made to tailor the debate. Playing it safe is the name of the game.

Of course it would be wrong to blame the spin doctors for all of this, as though they were a secret cabal wielding extraordinary power. It is not as though the world is full of brave, visionary politicians being muzzled by timorous communications experts.

The politicians themselves are scared to say anything which might lose votes, upset the party hierarchy, or be off brand as the marketers say.

And often they have woeful verbal skills, and would probably be completely incoherent, or at least anaesthetically dull, if they did not have someone behind them to put words in their mouths.

The real problem is that gap, that busy pause before anyone says anything, that tendency to run to the researchers for more and more information about what people want to hear.

Not only true political debate is stifled by this approach, but also inspiration and leadership.

Where are the speeches that ring, the politicians who really engage their audiences?

Take the speech by the Reverend Martin Luther King on August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the civil rights march on Washington D.C. Even today it has the power to move people to tears.

It was a sort of rolling thunder of words, an irresistible tide. "I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

"I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering in the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

“I have a dream today.”

And so King’s words rolled on into that pounding last paragraph: “When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’”

Now it is true that not all speakers get to speak on such an emotion-laden occasion, and about so just a cause. It is also true that not every speaker can carry off the resonating utterances of a great preacher. But it is the way King wields his words that makes this one of the greatest speeches of all time, not just the moment in history when it was made.

Bill Clinton writes in his autobiography *My Life* that he wept as he watched the speech on television at the age of 17. He realised the importance of the way King used words, referring to his “rhythmic cadences reminiscent of old Negro spirituals, his voice at once booming and shaking.”

“He had,” says Clinton, “said everything I believed, far better than I ever could.”

Where are the great speechmakers of today? As Watson rightly points out: “It seems incredible that since 11 September 2001 no leader has uttered words that will ring forever in our minds, or even for a year or two.”

Perhaps Watson was wondering what speech he would have written for Paul Keating if he had been Prime Minister at the time.

Watson, of course, was Keating’s speechwriter, and between the two of them they produced some famous speeches. But on the whole, Australia has been rather under-endowed with great speechmakers.

New South Wales Premier Bob Carr has written that this is perhaps not a bad thing. He points out in his review of William Safire’s compilation of famous speeches, *Lend Me Your Ears*, that there are no Australian speeches. He goes on to say: “After all, we’ve had no war of independence; no civil war; no religious strife; and only one invasion in our history. Happy is the country without history. Happy is the country without oratory.”

He is right in the sense that it is often the troubled times in history which call most desperately for rhetoric. But his comment is a little ironic in that he himself is a pretty dab hand at wielding words, one of the better political wordsmiths around. (One should mention that he was a journalist before he

became a politician, but that's not the reason I have kind words to say about him).

He has spoken movingly of the tormented past of the Aborigines, and made a number of elegant speeches.

He is also someone who has depth. He thinks about issues, he raises questions that are not always popular.

In 2001 he spoke on global warming, the sort of topic that few politicians want to touch because it involves people making difficult choices; the sort of topic where there are no easy fixes and resorting to empty slogans is not going to get anybody anywhere.

He said then: "The weight of evidence on global warming is now overwhelming. I'll just depress you a little. The snow in the European Alps is 40 per cent less than it was ten to fifteen years ago. I mentioned this to someone recently who said he knew this firsthand because he'd made a journey across the Alps and wondered why so much building work was being done on houses. The frozen soil on which the house foundations are built is melting and they've got to build new foundations in this alpine country..."

"The human species which we celebrate for its creativity has got a dark side. Since we emerged from those African forests into the wilds of Europe and south-east Asia, finding our way generation after generation, spreading over the planet, our species has evinced an irrepressible desire to remake the world in our own image, not to live with the constraints of nature, but to wrestle nature to the ground and impose our design on it.

"It's the spirit of the Renaissance isn't it? The marvelous genius, the creativity of the Renaissance and man as the measure of all things. And woman too, one might add in the spirit of our times. So, we are our own species and we reserve to ourselves the right to remake our world as we desire it. Consequently, the great natural system of Amazonia is being transformed and there is a terrifying loss of wetlands, coral reefs are turning brittle and dying, and species are under threat due to the impact of the human animal on their ecosystems.

"The challenge for people who feel the desperate case to save our natural world, to stop the retreat of nature, is to persuade our fellow Australians that we need to make sacrifices to do it. That is the hardest task in public affairs."

Now that's good, plain talk with a dash of style, culture and poetry. Whether you agree with him or not, it is a case made with passion, a nailing of colours to the mast.

That is a rare thing in politics when it comes to the hard issues. Much more common are the glib phrases or deliberate obfuscations we have been talking about, mixed with the occasional outright lie.

The effect of this abuse and misuse of language, it is worth repeating, is the erosion of trust. Probably never before have so many people in Australia had such a low opinion of politicians and even the normal work of government departments.

So how do we work towards a truer, more powerful, more embracing political process? How can that trust be won back?

I think the solution is two-pronged. One involves how we use language, the other a decision to back off on the spin as much as possible.

When it comes to language, two things need to happen.

One is a move to the clear and concise use of language. As Watson says: “Democracy depends upon plain language. It depends upon common understanding...Deliberate ambiguities, slides of meaning, obscure, incomprehensible or meaningless words poison the democratic process by leaving people less able to make informed or rational decisions.”

Writing clearly and concisely is harder than it sounds, but it can be learnt.

The second language change is to start using the power of language to inspire and motivate, to give us a vision for the future to replace the sort of seedy realpolitik that characterises so much of Australian political life at present.

Words are more than just little labels which carry a set amount of information. Strung together with a sense of rhythm and lyricism, used in the service of powerful thoughts, they can move mountains.

In that oft-quoted essay, Orwell did a cunning thing. He took a passage of breathtaking power and translated it into what he called modern English of the worst sort.

Here is the result: “Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”

Here is the passage he degraded. It is a well-known verse from *Ecclesiastes*: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

So then we come to the second part of the solution, and the people in this room are in a very good position to help with this. It is to re-examine the whole process of government and political communication; to use it to help politicians and senior bureaucrats build powerful arguments and have the courage to be wrong sometimes so they can be wiser later.

It would certainly be more fun to use language skills to put the pizzazz back into politics than to weave complex word safety nets.

We are all trapped in a system of too many advisers, too much second-guessing, too much mean-minded party politics. It is as though we were tiny players on a shrunken field, interested only in finishing the game safely. How far that is from those great green moments in sport where common sense and gravity are defied by a player filled with mad brilliance.

The very thing that makes words so fascinating and powerful, their refusal to play simple arithmetic games, their buzzing connotations, is making us afraid of them. That makes us want to tame them. As Don Watson says: "Words, being open to all kinds of interpretation including some that are not on message, are chosen only after strenuous risk assessment."

Humphrys asks: "And what is the message? Well, mostly it is what they think we want to hear. They find that out by asking focus groups...What they do is tell the politicians what language will sell the policies and what won't.

"The effect is that language has a different function in the new politics from the one it had in the old. Then, it was tested in debate by the politicians. Now it is tested in small groups of 'consumers' by marketing people. Last week: Coca-Cola. This week: hospital waiting lists."

What I'm saying is that many of you here today are wordsmiths. You know how to turn a good sentence, place a word where it can burst into life. I am sure you care about the debasement of public language, and long to give voice to the poetic – or at least some bracing, untidy doses of truth - rather than the expedient.

In this risk-averse age of market testing and endless political polling, this is not going to be easy. But there is lots at stake. Can we win back faith in our democracy? Any party that could do that, that could inspire us to buy anew into our society, could reap great benefits. It could even find itself in power.

Let us free up our words again, and who knows what songs we will be able to sing?

Let me give the last word to poet ee cummings:

"Humanity i love you because you
are perpetually putting the secret of
life in your pants and forgetting
it's there and sitting down
on it."