

# Report

## Speeches and speech-makers

Fringe meeting, September 2001, with Roy Jenkins, Max Atkinson and Paddy Ashdown  
Report by **Duncan Brack**

The Liberal Democrat History Group's latest publication, *Great Liberal Speeches* (reviewed in this issue of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* by Conrad Russell), was launched at the Liberal Democrat autumn conference in Bournemouth.

Able chaired and introduced by Paddy Ashdown, a capacity audience was addressed first by Max Atkinson, a freelance communications consultant and Visiting Professor at Henley Management College, and author of the excellent book on political rhetoric, *Our Masters' Voices*. His talk was a concise version of his introduction to *Great Liberal Speeches*, 'Mere rhetoric?', so we do not summarise it here – buy the book and read it!

Essentially he argued that political rhetoric was an important communications skill; furthermore, although some politicians have an innate talent for it, everyone can study and learn it, and improve their ability to put over their message. He lamented the propensity of modern broadcasters to downplay the importance of speeches and to transmit only soundbites and their own interpretations of the speakers' words – and also to play up the importance of interviews, 'however sterile and tedious they may be'. As he argued:

One piece of evidence to which their attention should be drawn is the fact that editors and publishers of books do not seem to find televised interviews interesting, inspiring or provocative enough to merit the publication of collections of *Great Interviews*, whether Liberal or of any

other kind. Rhetoric and oratory may well have had a bad press in recent years, but readers of this book will surely be thankful that it consists of speeches rather than transcripts of interviews. They can therefore look forward to reading carefully developed arguments in language robust enough to have survived the immediate moment of delivery to become a form of historical literature.

Roy Jenkins' speech, fulsomely admired in *The Times* by Matthew Parris, is reproduced here verbatim:

I'm going to talk about Liberal oratory, in a reflective historical context. I begin with 1859, when the Liberal Party was effectively founded, in Willis' Rooms in London. The great scene there was that Lord Palmerston shook hands with Lord John Russell – he hadn't done for a long time past. John Bright was also there. The great beneficiary of that coming together was Gladstone, though Gladstone, ironically, was not present – he was still detached, in his Peelite mode, at that stage.

He was the first great orator of the Liberal Party – although Palmerston should by no means be entirely dismissed. The thing was that Palmerston hardly ever spoke outside the House of Commons, or, say, a Lord Mayor's banquet in the City of London. He did make one great speech, in the market place at Tiverton, for which he was Member of Parliament (and about five other constituencies, not all at the same time), but broadly he was a parliamentary orator, and certainly his 1851 *Civis Romanus Sum* speech echoes

down the ages. Apart from anything else, it was so long that it was always said to have begun when the light was slowly fading, on a summer evening in June, and when he sat down, dawn was distinctly visible through the windows on the other side of the chamber.

But broadly, Gladstone was the first great mass orator. Gladstone made an art out of mass oratory; to some extent, Disraeli came along behind him. And when I was in the latter stage of my life of Gladstone, one of the things that most intrigued me was what was the secret of Gladstone's mass oratory. His parliamentary oratory I can understand; he rarely gave the House of Commons less than two and half hours. In the country he was more restrained; an hour and forty minutes was about his average. But what was the quality that made him hold his audience? – say, in the Waverley Market at Edinburgh, where 10,000 people were present, and several of them fainted and had to be carried out over the heads of the others, for an hour and forty minutes, for a detailed analysis of Disraeli's budgetary policy.

He didn't make many jokes. He had quite a good, if rather boisterous, sense of fun in private, but he was not a great wit in public. He never remotely played down to his audience. What was the secret that enabled him to hold these great audiences, largely of working people, as they were then called, and make them come back for

Paddy Ashdown and Roy Jenkins (photo: Peter Dollimore)



more on future occasions? I decided, after a good deal of reflection, that it was essentially that although he spoke a bit above their heads, he elevated their appreciation of themselves. He made them feel that they were more important in the world than they thought when they came in. A very good example of that, I think, was given in his speech at the end of the first Midlothian Campaign of 1880, when in West Lothian, he started: 'It is the honour of England which is at stake' – couldn't get away with that in West Lothian today – 'a great trial is now proceeding before the nation. We have none of the forum of a judicial trial. There are no peers in Westminster Hall. There are no judges on the Woolsack. But if we concentrate our mind upon the truth of the case, apart from its mere exterior, it is a grander and more august spectacle than was ever exhibited either in Westminster Hall or in the House of Lords – a nation called to undertake a great and responsible duty, a duty on which depends the peace of Europe and the destinies of England.'

That was an example of his style, which, may, as I say, enormously increased the self-esteem of his audience. And as people like their self-esteem being increased – we all of us do – that, I think, if one gets to the core of it, was the secret of his remarkable oratorical power.

Going on to former Liberal leaders, Gladstone was followed briefly by Rosebery. Rosebery I regard as one of the most inflated reputations of whoever got to the top of politics. He was a florid orator, with a certain flamboyance; he once hit a lectern with such force that the typically very large ruby in his ring sprang out of it and ran down the centre aisle of the hall. But I have not a great respect for Rosebery.

Campbell-Bannerman was a cosy leader; a very good healing leader for the party when it needed one. Then there was Asquith. Asquith made his reputation as a great logical debater. In the two and quarter years of Campbell-Bannerman's premiership, whenever there was a difficult issue in the House of Commons, Campbell-Bannerman always said: 'send for the sledgehammer',

and by that he meant Asquith, who would come and destroy the arguments of the opposition with a relentless logic. And although I would put Asquith very high amongst Prime Ministers of this century – certainly third, maybe for real political genius Churchill and Lloyd George exceeded him, maybe Attlee ran him close, as someone who could hold a reforming government together, but I would certainly put Asquith third amongst the Prime Ministers, as the Peel of the twentieth century, and that is no mean tribute to anybody – in the days of his premiership, he probably depended less upon oratory than any other major Prime Minister except for Attlee – who certainly didn't depend upon oratory.

Greater oratory was in a way supplied by his daughter Violet – Violet Bonham-Carter as she became – and my only criticism of this admirable book of speeches is that, while it includes one from her, it does not include her truly great speech at the luncheon in the National Liberal Club after Asquith had been humiliatingly defeated in East Fife in 1918 – we had to wait a long time for Menzies Campbell to avenge that defeat – and was re-elected for Paisley in 1921. In that speech in the National Liberal Club – and unfortunately her oratory wasn't entirely immediately fulfilled – she contrasted the thin range of chairs inside the House of Commons with the great crowd which welcomed him back outside. 'Hold on', she said, 'hold on, we are coming'. Well, we are coming now, but it's some time after that. Violet was a remarkable female orator.

And then we come to Lloyd George, and his contrast both with Gladstone before him, and Churchill after him – because Churchill qualifies as a Liberal orator, at any rate in the early days, up to 1914. Compared with Gladstone, Lloyd George had far less range of knowledge, classical and other, and far less intellectual range – but he was a far more seductive orator than either Gladstone before him or Churchill after him. Both of them spoke *at* their audiences, Churchill even more than Gladstone, but Lloyd George insinuated himself into the mind of his audiences, and carried

them with him. The example I give of that is a passage, not the best known of the passages from his Limehouse oration in July 1909, dealing with the fairly narrow subject, you might have thought, of the mineral rights duty in his Budget of that year, directed to setting up a miners' welfare fund.

'Have you ever been down a coal mine?' he said. 'I went down one the other day. We sank into a pit half a mile deep. We then walked underneath the mountain, and we did about three-quarters of a mile with rock and shale above us. The earth seemed to be straining – around us and above us – to crush us in. You could see the pit-props bent and twisted and sundered until you saw their fibres split in resisting the pressure. Sometimes they give way, and then there is mutilation and death. Often a spark ignites, the whole pit is deluged in fire, and the breath of life is scorched out of hundreds of breasts by the consuming flame ... And yet when the Prime Minister and I knock at the door of these great landlords, and say to them: "Here, you know these poor fellows who have been digging up royalties at the risk of their lives, some of them are old, they have survived the perils of their trade, they are broken, they can earn no more. Won't you give them something towards keeping them out of the workhouse?" they scowl at us, and we say: "Only a ha'penny, just a copper." They say: "You thieves!" ... If this is an indication of the view taken by these great landlords of their responsibility to the people who at the risk of life create their wealth, then I say their day of reckoning is at hand.'

Now, Churchill – a strong supporter, junior partner with Lloyd George as a constructive radical in those days – could never have done that. This passage in which Lloyd George made his East End audience feel the tensions and terrors of life underground, though very few of them had ever been nearer a coal mine than Paddington Station, could never have been done by Churchill. He might have extolled the place of coal, and consequently of miners, in Britain's island story, the rise of the national wealth of Great Britain. He would have done it

with phrases more elevated than Lloyd George's, but in the abstract. He would never have made his audience feel the menace of the great weight of earth above them, and the testing almost to destruction of the pit props. And though of course Churchill, when his time came – that was after his Liberal time, I am afraid – was the greatest and most important orator in the history of the twentieth century, on the whole, it is remarkable the amount of time which he devoted, during the war years, under tremendous pressure, to speech preparation.

He was never, unlike Lloyd George, a spontaneous orator. He always needed to have everything very carefully prepared. There is evidence that in the summer of 1940, at the worst and most pressured time, he devoted ten hours to preparing one House of Commons speech. He had the virtue of being an immensely dedicated and fluent dictater, but it was ten hours of fluent dictation to get it right. On another occasion, in Washington, when he was about to address Congress, his dictating secretary spoke of the fourteen and half hours of the dictation she had to take. Was this misapplied time? I don't really think so, because those great speeches of the summer of 1940 marked out the history of that remarkable period like choruses in a Greek play. They did help to sustain the nation; in most other circumstances they would have been somewhat over the top, but not then – and also I think that the catharsis, the satisfaction which he got from delivering these great orations, and the increase in his energy for the future which came as a result of them more than compensated for the time which he had devoted to their preparation.

Broadly, as I say, he was an abstract, powerful, sometimes over-the-top orator, but I came across one example I'd like to quote to you of his trying to learn from Roosevelt. Roosevelt was a very interesting transitional orator – he was sort of half-way between the grandiloquence of Gladstone and Churchill and the chatty manner of Reagan and Clinton – but he always liked homely metaphors. His most famous homely metaphor was when he

defended lease-lend, by saying that 'if fire broke out in my neighbour's house, and I had a garden hose, what would I do? I would lend it to him. I wouldn't sell it to him, I wouldn't tell him to go and buy a hose of his own, I would lend it to him. And he would say, what should I do afterwards, well, give it me back when the fire's put out.'

Not much chance, actually, of getting the lend-lease supplies back, or much use they would have been afterwards, but it was a brilliant homely metaphor, and I was struck by Churchill, having apparently half learned from FDR, half trying to learn, when he came back from the first Quebec conference – there were two, in 1943 and 1944 – on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> September 1943. He went to the House of Commons on the Monday, and began by saying that when he'd arrived at Greenock from North America on the Sunday morning, he'd immediately read the Sunday newspapers, and they were rather critical – interesting example of the enormous priority he always gave to newspaper reading. He was reminded, he said, of the tale about the sailor who jumped into a dock – at Plymouth, I think it was – to rescue a small boy from drowning. About a week later, the sailor was accosted by a woman, who asked: 'are you the man who pulled my son out of the dock the other night? The sailor replied, modestly, 'that is indeed true, ma'am'. 'Ah', said the woman, 'you're the man I was looking for. Where's his cap?' That seems to me a very clear example of Churchill trying to reduce his grandiloquence, and learn from Roosevelt, with whom he'd just spent some time.

Oratory – I agree strongly with Max Atkinson – is on the whole at a discount; just as debating, as opposed to the quick exchange at Prime Minister's question time, is at a discount in the House of Commons. One shouldn't be too dismayed – though I am a bit dismayed by that – because it's an art with certain advantages, and although it seems to be almost dying before our eyes, it is bound to change. No-one would expect a Gladstone speech of two and half hours, redolent with many Latin quotations, to be persuasive at the fifth time – Burke wouldn't sound all

that good in the present House of Commons. But nonetheless I think one does regret the almost complete decline in politics, in the last twenty-five years or so, I think, of the sustained arguing of a case, with the careful use of language and phraseology which helps to advance it. But there we are.

That's my review of Liberal oratory over the last 150 years. And it gives me confidence in the future of Liberal oratory. One never knows, there may be a great outbreak of Conservative oratory under Mr Iain Duncan Smith, who may be an underestimated figure, though I doubt it. I have more faith in the ability of Charles Kennedy.

Paddy Ashdown wound up the meeting by stressing his own belief in the power of language. 'I've always thought that words are the battleground of politics. If you can find the right words, and you own them, you've owned the battle. And the one thing you can't do is let others borrow your words ... However long you spend on that, in the end it is worthwhile.'

And, using an extract from a speech by Gladstone, itself included in *Great Liberal Speeches*, quoted by Paddy in his last speech to the House of Commons, and used once again by more than one speaker in the conference debate on Afghanistan the day before (less than two weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup>), he showed how Gladstone's words could speak to the present:

Do not forget that the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan, amongst the winter snows, is no less inviolate in the eye of Almighty God than can be your own. Do not forget that he who made you brothers in the same flesh and blood, bound you by the laws of universal love and that love is not limited to the shores of this island, but passes across the whole surface of the earth, encompassing the greatest along with the meanest in its unmeasured scope.

As Paddy concluded, 'Those are words from the last century, but sentiments that are truly Liberal, and we heard them expressed yesterday. We are, in a real sense, the children of our history.'