"Phil Collins brings intellect, imagination and empathy to the speechmakers' craft. His insights into what makes a good speech, and his piercing critique of what goes wrong, are in a class of their own."

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

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INTRODUCTION: ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Speeches still matter, even in a technological age. The act of persuasion is ubiquitous in professional life and very many people need to master it. The act of making a speech is a medium that has remained essentially unchanged through the ages. The anthologies of great speeches are a reminder of the continuing power of well-arranged words but they are not necessarily the best guide to the task that you confront. A speech becomes memorable by virtue of the grandeur of the occasion it describes and most people are performing at a less exalted level. That does not mean that we cannot still write and speak well, or that there are not certain characteristics that all successful acts of communication have in common. This book will introduce the central argument that you need to understand your central argument. That is the most important precept of all good writing. This book will help you to master the basics of the craft with reference to the following mnemonic: D: effective Delivery; E: setting Expectations; T: the central argument, known as the Topic; A: understanding the Audience; I: making the speech Individual to you; and L: minding the Language that you deploy. Pay attention to detail. The precise details to which you must pay attention are the subject of this book.

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.