



What makes a good political speech in New Zealand?

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New Zealand has its own Art of the Political Speech. Having had over 15 years' experience of working on such speeches, nearly 20 years' experience of political advice at Cabinet and Senior Officials level, I might have some experience worth sharing.

I am discussing an unusual kind of political speech. I am not discussing how we write a political rave or harangue. I am not telling how you construct an air-towel machine. I am not going to show you how to compose Vogon poetry. I am going to be extremely difficult, and add the further constraint, that I am not even going to discuss how a politician projects and communicates their own personality. I am going to do precisely the opposite.

That counterfactual however is not a Houdini act. I have not locked myself in a safe wrapped in chains, under the sea. There are such speeches. New Zealanders have always delivered such speeches and listened to such speeches. The genre of oratory that I am talking about this afternoon is the craft of the think-piece, of the ideas-piece, that gets people to think. We shall consider such examples, in passing. We are also privileged to have leading exponents of this craft in this room

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today, from whom I have learned. Such modes of oratory interconnect Maori and Pakeha New Zealand. The two peoples who encountered one another in New Zealand and co-formed a nation, came from two nineteenth century cultures that rated high oral performance, and esteemed orators, as the proof of leadership, as an index of high civilization, as the protagonists of a great dramatic event. Voices have woven New Zealand, in anger, in negotiation, in recognition and acceptance, into peace.

New Zealanders are as good at speeches, as we have been good at the art of the political cartoon. David Low fixed the cartoon images of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin for all time. Subsequent cartoonists of the two tyrants have been constrained by Low, to the extent that they must work within a Lowian register. The political think-piece and ideas-shifter has been the genre of political rhetoric at which Deputy Prime Ministers and Ministers of Finance such as Bill English and Sir Michael Cullen have distinguished themselves. It is better to show how the mental landscape is in fact moving than make an earthquake.

You will have noted the word “craft”, which I just used. I don’t mean that in the sense that oratory is now an antiquarian discipline, superseded by modern media. It is not like “Arts and Crafts” or “pottery” or “blacksmithing”. I mean it – yes, in its political sense – in the old Germanic roots of power and cunning. When Sir George Grey appeared at Dunedin in 1851, the good Presbyterians there expressed their abhorrence at him by condemning him for **Kingcraft**, a trinity of evil crafts that included **Priestcraft** and **Witchcraft**, in the Scottish Reformation.

The King is the sovereign who commands and compels. Who otherwise can get people to do things, but by dint of persuasion? Craft yields us two other concepts from the first exponents of oratory, the ancient Greeks.

They are **Irony** and **sophistry**. We are back to the question that Francis Bacon raised, when he said 400 years ago: – ““What is truth?” asked Pilate, and stayed not for an answer.” In the Platonic tradition, the sophist is the PR guy and spin-doctor of ancient Greece, against which the whole order of philosophers set themselves. In a powerful image in his dialogue “**The Sophist**”, Plato has Socrates propose that we all turn on the hunter of young people, of fees (and interest-bearing students loans), and hunt him down in turn. And as he will hide in the distorting mirror of language, we must hunt him down in the mirror, segmenting it, until we have trapped him.

Irony is something New Zealanders used to do well. It was a characteristic, a trace element of our founding, our early literature. Sir George Grey, Samuel Butler and Katherine Mansfield – whether Grey in “the Polynesian Mythology” and his despatches, Butler in “Erewhon” or Mansfield in “the Prelude” and “At the Bay” deploy irony in the fullest logical sense. Irony is not crying “Pax” after some banter and teasing. That is like mistaking a penalty kick for a game of Rugby. Irony is dissimulation that brings about a disjunction between apparent mimesis and structures of language and the semantic undertow, which may be oblique, ambivalent or antithetic. It is related to the Greek words for peace – *Eirene*, from which we get eirenics, as the antonym for *polemics*. Thus we realise that irony is the opposite speech mode to polemics.

Irony is also as Hayden White observes in *Metahistory*, the natural rhetorical mode of Liberalism as a form of Government. What did Sir George Grey, Samuel Butler and Katherine Mansfield all have in common? Profound formation in Victorian irony.

Craft in the mode of irony might well be compared to inoculation, or to the *pharmakon*, that Plato talks about. *Pharmakon* means both a medicine and a poison in ancient Greek. Inoculation is something like that. An ironic speech is an inoculation. Instead of the immune system being tricked, it is the mind.

Preservation of the civic peace is important in New Zealand political discourse. Other modes of political expression exist which shock-jocks and hate-speakers and certain bloggers may use. I am only highlighting one thread of the possible. It is the thread I have the most experience of. The political ecosystem however is not one to be turned into a dustbowl. Nor it is a mannered eighteenth century salon, as one Australian judge famously remarked of Australian constitutional discourse.

Fronting up and self-effacement are the prime disposition of the speaker. The fronting up is the necessary civic act, of fronting up to the crowd that demands answers. The crowd can be a Greek chorus, it could be a lynch-mob, it could be a deputation of kaumātua or an indignant group from a “public meeting”. It might be a run of “tire-kickers” coming to check the product over. In all cases the fronting up is to one’s “citizen peers” – even if they might guillotine you. It is the most republican moment in New Zealand public life, locked in from the beginnings of our polity, that authority must perform an act of “divulgence”.

The craft consists of turning potential lynch-mobs, into one's jurors, of turning sceptical peers into colleagues, or at least those who would give you the benefit of the doubt.

The difference between New Zealand public demanding answers and the Australian, is that New Zealanders do not suspect authority, but they suspect that truth has been withheld from them. They want to know "the fact of the matter". Australians suspect authority per se, which is why their choruses turn into demotic frenzies of outrage and even pogroms. Hunting down Governors and Governors General has been a blood sport since 1808. It won't be any different if they have a president one day. The reality in New Zealand is that there is no one so clever and so intelligent that twelve good women and men, and true, may not see through them, or have an inkling of untruth. What New Zealand audiences want is for you to:

'fess up' – as Helen Clark memorably put it.

Tell it as it is – as the public keep telling us. New Zealanders are still late Victorian positivists in their tests for the truth. We are still Hardy's people, people out of a Hardy novel, reading Herbert Spencer, just like Robert Stout did. Provide facts. Sow the text all throughout with the seeds of fact. It gives people things to check up on afterwards.

Telling it as it is often involves understatement and anti-rhetoric in New Zealand. New Zealanders do not respond to local varieties of "Blood, Sweat and Tears", "The Fruits of Victory will be ashes in our mouth" or to "The New Society" or "the New Horizon". They would not like hearing about "The Big Society". New Zealanders have a positive hunger for the truth. We are brought back to the role of the Philosopher. As Plato was acutely aware, the philosopher might hunt down sophists and banish

poets but the political philosopher has sophistic and poetic guises. One day a PR political party might just be a rock-band. And why not?

New Zealanders are avid to learn secrets. This is to convert them into light-of-day truths or falsehoods. They are the deciders. They will by-pass an airhead live media just to get at the truth of what is ordering their world.

I wonder if the underlay here is Presbyterian. Scotland, Canada and New Zealand are nations with strong Scottish-descent populations. Certain values have entered the political culture. Scotland was about the poorest and weakest of European states from the 11th – 18th century. It had a royal court, and so it had “court-esy”, – it had a legal system, and so it had forms of government and international personality. Scots had a unique and complex yet creative relationship with the Renaissance and Reformation. What they took from the advent of printing and the new learning and the ability to get back to original sources of Scripture and doctrine, was a rejection of mediation. As we have seen they did not like unusual mediation of power by kings, witches and warlocks, and priest. When Charles I tried to impose the Book of Common Prayer at St Giles in Edinburgh, a stool was thrown at the clergyman and a riot ensued. The ornaments and tropes of Renaissance Anglican Church English were suspicious to ears that spoke and thought in Scots.

So when Helen Clark had to explain New Zealand’s military support for the war against the Taliban, she declared simply that it was “the decent thing”. British party leaders, last year, when faced with the Scottish Independence referendum, began by trying to sing arias to the United Kingdom. They inadvertently deployed sophisticated rhetoric that disgusted the Scottish electorate. Polls declined for the No vote. Only by fronting up, and telling it as it is, did polls recover, and they remained

constant until the second Salmond-Darling debate, which finally engaged the female electorate in what had been a macho campaign to date. Last minute demonstrations of passion and vehemence by Gordon Brown were very necessary. It was foreseen that the final fortnight would require a shift. But the Prime Minister's response to the second Salmond-Darling debate showed great insight. Accepting that Scotswomen needed to be addressed, he went to the Scottish Widows headquarters in Edinburgh, and spoke with people, not at them, and he did so, with a stroke of genius. He sat on a stool, like the Irish comedian Dave Allen used to do, thereby diminishing his great height and putting himself on the level.

It is evident then that great irony is required, even with anti-rhetoric to under the range of the guns of suspicion in an audience. Forget "the Worm". An audience in a room subconsciously share an emotion, of being relaxed, engaged, excited, bored, sceptical, irritated. A singer, a stand-up comic, a politician, who is good at their job and not totally self-enthralled, always picks it up.

Be unafraid of just a few relevant footnotes. Take warning from the poet Pindar however, from ancient Greece. His poetry teacher as a youth was a woman called Corinna. He turned up with a poem the first time, and she pronounced it uncouth and unlearned. He came back the second time, and burdened his poem with so many myths and legends and references, that she warned - "**sow with the hand, not the whole bag**". The third time he got it just right. We aren't academics.

Satisfying those expectations meets a basic epistemological requirement.

Now I reveal my own irony, which some of you will have anticipated, which is how does the ironist persuade people of truth, when their own truth is at a disjunct with the mode of delivery, might

even confirm and aggravate the suspicion? How do the speaker and audience part in peace? For the speaker is being knowingly manipulative.

It's a bit like being a fast bowler. It helps to have a firm grip on the truth, on the logic and facts that support it. You have to aim right. It is also a play. Such a *bowl* is potentially a lethal weapon. It has been turned into a game. That is irony.

So we must tell the truth if we are to divulge it from the best state of our understanding. Part of the relative success of the exercise comes from doing one's honest best.

We must be civic, and respect the profound ecosystem of civicism that sustains New Zealand as it does not the United Kingdom. What the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur called "educative dissensus" avails in New Zealand. The art of deliberative civil prudence should be ethically assumed to be the default position for both oneself and the general public. There is jurisprudence, the Science of Law. There is civil prudence – a way of being reasonably wise and honest midst probability and contingency. Civil prudence is ecologically sustainable, and hopefully surplus-adding discourse.

We must render it a game. The truth that could hurt, can be turned into laughter and ebullience. Ideas are dangerous things and New Zealanders, according to some PR companies, run out of the cinemas and auditoriums screaming when "ideas" are mentioned. Dissimulation is necessary to get over the hurdle. Yet I assure you, audiences can be transformed into thinkers, into deliberative assemblies, instead of whipped up into Gadarene swine.

Quiet authority and self-effacement are the way to go. People want to see if they can be persuaded of your sense of the truth. The truth is the horizon before which you stand, the presence of the future, the possibility of path-finding the truth. This quiet demeanour is a contribution towards a deliberate reason, which everyone can pick up and use, or take away and do DIY.

The don'ts are:-

Don't pretend to superiority.

You will affirm your authority by dislocating it, and by not making yourself the issue.

Don't be moralistic.

Don't make yourself out to be politically or ideologically correct in terms of disciplines that are not epistemologically verifiable.

Don't whip yourself up into zeal.

People hate dogmatists.

Don't be a prig.

People hate PC.

Don't be gnostic, as if you alone have access to special insight and knowledge.

People hate sorcerers, witches and wizards.

Don't be a personalist.

It's not a poetry reading. You're not reading out diary excerpts of your extra special wannabe celebrity life.

Mislay the self, and don't worry about it.

The ethical disposition to speech-craft is the comportment of truth itself. That is more important than gesture. There is no need to do strange things in a mirror. In token of which I shall discuss none of the speeches that I worked on myself, or contributed to, nor shall I reveal whom I helped, with which speeches, or to what extent, and what the effect of those speeches were. I chose to serve.

I am a veteran speechwriter. My ethical comportment however has to be annulment in my employer. My employer in turn has to be on the level with his or her audience, and do the daring, - the truly outrageous thing, which is to efface personality and political brand exercises, to tell the truth, argue the truth, as they see it, in the language proper to them. That means that the ideas do the playing on the field, while the orator is taken for the sports commentator.

The first thing is to make yourself vanish, tell yourself that you don't matter. That way one primary effacement is made, of effacement before the possibility of the truth. For the vanishing to work, and not leave the audience disconcerted, like Bilbo Baggins' vanishing act, the ideas must have developed a drama, close the start and assumed lives of their own. Narrative – confident narrative construction – assures the audience that this isn't a meek, timid or bewilderingly ambivalent exercise, not an insipid sermon. And yesterday's speech is only fish and chip paper, the thing of a moment, fondled or taken to task only by historians, or else shared like a rare wine by discerning politicians. I recall The Speaker Jonathan Hunt's words on Simon Upton's valedictory speech of 2000. Simon has been the best all round exponent of the arts of reasoned political oratory discussed in this paper, and he was my teacher.

One technology of rhetoric was identified by Thomas Hobbes the author of "Leviathan" according to All Souls don, Noel Malcolm. It is entirely the art of the ideas piece. That is, to anticipate various ideological positions of your audience, and give them all an entry into the game, by letting them

enter it playing the game by the rules they expect, on the consoles they have played it with hitherto. Hobbes contrived a game, whereby Jesuits, Machiavellians, civic republicans, jurists, absolute monarchists, Protestants, merchants, scholars and nobles, torturers and accountants and men (and women) of letters could find recognizable entrée. Of course, once within the shifting coils of Leviathan, they would discover the world as they knew it, morphing about them. Like ‘The Rocky Horror Picture Show’ narrator, that Robert Muldoon played, the deliverer is basically saying, while concealing the fact, *“I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey”*.

A candid Guile is required to lure the audience into a story, even if it is the story of ideas and where we sit amongst them.

I take from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) two threefold structures for rhetorical architectonics.

The first threesome is Mimesis1, Mimesis2, and Mimesis3. Mimesis in ancient Greek does not mean imitation. It means representation. And we know that Picasso’s portraits of women as are much representations as portraits of women by Ingres. Mimesis1 refers to the rhetoric and linguistic structures of the speech. Mimesis2 is the “as if”. It is the make-believe, the suspension of belief, the thought-experiment. Mimesis3 is the application of the idea whereby it finds its meaning. These are not sequential. You don’t do one, – turn the ignition key and get the speech going, and then rev up and fly and then finish the journey, to derive “meaning” and purpose from it. These mimetic activities occur all at once. You will find this in Ricoeur’s book “Time and Narrative” and in “the Rule of Metaphor”.

The second triune structure relates to Political Philosophy itself. It consists of technique, critique and mystique.

Technique is the actual technical operations of government. Ricoeur discussed it in “the Political Paradox” of 1957 in relation to Machiavelli. That Machiavelli told it as it was, was his probity, he remarked, about Renaissance power-talk. A speech has to have technique. It’s like Mimesis¹.

Mystique refers to the arts of poesis, of poetry. I use a word a Maori friend taught me in English about the Kingitanga, to convey the concepts of poesis that Ricoeur talks about in French. I refer to the generation of *cultural surplus*. Utopia as the mode of New Zealand poetics, is the theme on which I shall conclude.

Critique is necessary. Critique is the role of the philosopher. Politicians undertake critique and are critiqued all the time. As Ricoeur also remarks, the tyrant is the inverse of the philosopher. We know what tyrants think about free speech and free thought. George Grey and Robert Muldoon were formidably intelligent men in power in New Zealand who became tyrannical. Fortunately it is rare that we have to attack personalities or institutions. It is a while since any of us have had to take up the passionate indignation of Zola’s “*J’accuse*”. The perennial problem in New Zealand is Ideology. New Zealanders have had resorts to ideological constructs and ideological repression that have been quite unusual among free democratic OECD polities. It may come from the totalising power of the old New Zealand State before the 1980s liberalisation. It may come from the absence of great graduate school universities like those in the North Atlantic or at ANU. Critique is first and foremost ideology critique for Ricoeur (and me).

Now we all have ideology. Napoleon was the first to dismiss an idea by saying “*that’s just ideology*”. But just as we all live in language, like fish in water, we all have ideologies, or come dripping and trailing clouds of them. I am a veritable stormfront of ideology. There is nothing wrong with ideology *per se*. They are structures of political rationality, narrative, myth, law, political economy, working assemblages that we operationalise into policy. They do however get in the way of the truth and of free inquiry. The fish have to be free to change the river they live in. We have to be free to morph the room. Analytical tools and *poiesis* alike vie to alter our language. Critique then is primarily ideology-critique.

You do it by changing the room the audience find themselves in so that they leave a different space from the one they entered 3/4s of an hour or an hour before. This is achieved by observing strict remorseless semantic laws. It is pure Information Science. Deep logic should encode the organisation. Your rule must be to avoid depth. **No semantic depth.** No shadow. Nothing Gothic. No cryptic codes poking out, with secret messages. No irony beyond the irony that secures the speech exercise in the audience’s minds in the first place. People don’t like being conned or having one pulled over them. Projection of mental energy is achieved through the modes of logic. This is an essential effacement before at least the prospect or possibility of truth.

Your architectonics should carry the flow. Just as the ancient orator used the syllogism to reason through an argument, we must use propositional logic to text the links. Parliamentary librarian James Collier remarked that a George Grey was a collection of *sorites*, of heaps of chains based on weak predicates. All Kiwi first year undergraduates need to do a course on Logic, regardless of what course they are studying.

Adjustment of ideological spaces should be carried out with reasonableness and clarity. Offer clean hygienic modernist surfaces, unstained by any passion beyond the evident conviction that delivers it.

It's time for some more don'ts :-

Don't say you are passionate.

Be passionate by doing. Passion like Love, is something you do, nothing you say.

Don't say you are thrilled or excited.

The audience wants to see that you enjoy being with them and that you like your job. Suffering servants make everyone feel miserable these days. "Uncle" Mickey Savage would be unelectable these days. But being thrilled and excited are messy and implausible emotions. These utterances are about as believable as the "pastoral joy" Vatican officials intone they feel. No one is interested in whether you are on a high or not. Only by doing and delivering will people ascribe positive emotions to your state of mind.

Don't be horrible.

Don't do anything to put a bullet through the pressurised hull of reasoned New Zealand civil discourse. Be responsible. During the Great Stink of 1858, parliamentarians were driven out of the new Houses of Parliament by the fumes of raw sewerage on the Thames. Don't make political discourse uninhabitable. Be responsible for good standards. The effect of Dr Brash's Orewa Speech of 2004 was most interesting. He observed all the rules of good speech-making proposed today. He was also a profound master of irony. In reality he opened a window to a Great Stink, which until Trevor Mallard's courageous reply that July, made reasoned political discourse impossible.

Treaty-scepticism is OK. I have progressed to a better understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi, and of Maori rights in New Zealand by being Cartesian about the ideologies built up (by Pakeha intellectuals mind you) about the Treaty. Responsible and seminal Treaty-sceptic texts have been written by Jeremy Waldron and Peter Adams. The test comes down to – does this speech seek to modify the discourse or blow it out of the water and incapacitate debate and reply? Is it a terror weapon, – a pulling of the knife in a brawl? Is it a proportionate response? In my view it was not proportionate. It might have been sophistry posing as an ideas-piece. We might have been listening to the sophist talking in Plato’s mirror. It might have been an honest question put with ironic intent. The *pharmakon* – recall- is both a medicine and a poison.

Wit is a martial art. It is a survival tool in the Beehive. Be prudent with wit in a speech. It may steal the speech and kill the argument. It may make people feel defenceless before a bullying untouchable aggressor. If I began a speech, with the quip I used in my Grey book, that “*New Zealand is proof that Nature does not always abhor a vacuum*”- that wouldn’t be very nice now, and it wouldn’t be very good for the speech. Even though the quip is a compliment.

Don’t preach. Don’t be moralistic. Don’t let the spittle of zeal fly. Don’t pretend to moral advantage.

I arrive now at the final perspective. The New Zealand ideas speech fronts up to the audience. It stands with its back to the future. It looks to the past, to walk back into the future, taking the audience with it. New Zealand is a profoundly utopian nation. Utopics are the presence of the future. The major political party that commands that space usually forms a government.

Maori have utopics (and dystopics). Pakeha have had utopics. It is futurity, not historical adumbration that provides the horizon for ideas-pieces in our polity. Though on that I offer Sir Apirana Ngata's magisterial Augustinian vision of Treaty, and New Zealand time, from his Address and Reply Debate speech of July 1939, on the final minutes to midnight, before WWII erupted. It is the most profound reflection on empire and power that any New Zealander has ever uttered.

To take Sir George Grey's speech, in the selection offered you here today, we feel repugnance at the I, I, I, me, me, me of the Grey's self-projection, Victorians settlers however wanted to see the magic show act of "the Great Man". Note however the deep futurity before which Grey stands, and presents his audience. Those horizons have never left us. Our *longee duree* is the presence of the future. Utopia as Ricoeur argues is also ideology critique. The original *Utopia* of Thomas More was as John Ruskin said "the one truly mischievous book ever written". Irony is the mode of the Utopic, its critical force and organisation. It is criticism by the incoming future of the entrenched ideological present. That is why Dr Brash was so effective. New Zealand is all the stronger now for having gone through that exercise. Immunity has been developed. The *pharmakon* has become a medicine not a poison.

What I have presented you today is something like the Earthquake House at Te Papa. I have shaken things up and yet restored them. The books and crockery never quite fell off the shelves. The mental space has perhaps changed and yet it is the same room. Hopefully I have disclosed the force of something we have long too afraid of, the force of New Zealand minds.