

THE ARTLESS ART:

LEADERSHIP AND THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRATIC RHETORIC

Persuasion is vital to the practice of democratic leadership, making speech and communication of fundamental importance. Yet democratic citizens habitually suspect political rhetoric as being either deceitfully empty or dangerously subversive. Rhetoric is thus central in democracy while paradoxically appearing either useless or pernicious. A consequence of this paradox for democratic leaders is that they are forced to avoid fine oratory in favour of a rhetorical style that sounds *un-rhetorical*, seeming to be plain factually-informative speech. This unique democratic form of rhetoric, that we have called an artless art, seeks to instil trust and to avoid appearing to talk down to the sovereign people. It is both helped and rendered problematic by the media, the essential communicative means in modern society, whose current dominance presents ever-new challenges and opportunities to democratic leaders.

Governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger announced in 2007 he had changed the way he would speak to the public. ‘Attacking people and saying “girlie men” and all those things ... I didn’t know any better ... I’ve learned that there’s a better way, and that is to bring people together, not insult them.’ The Governor’s change in rhetoric was attributed by commentators such as George Skelton to the necessity of selling the public on sweeping healthcare and costly public works programs. In Skelton’s view, Schwarzenegger had improved his verbal communication not so much in content, but in upgraded delivery: ‘Upgraded as in some signs of humility and less hubris. More charm without being cocky. Inflection in his voice, not bombast. Subdued rather than strident. More thoughtful and less theatrical.’ Schwarzenegger was now ‘fully the governor. No longer the Terminator’ (Skelton 2007).

Schwarzenegger had learned an essential lesson about democratic rhetoric – that its aim is to convey and persuade, not command and overawe. The governor’s political education in fact pointed to a fundamental difficulty of democratic leadership and the paradox of democratic rhetoric engendered by it. Because public discussion and debate are essential in a democracy, and because leaders are obliged to rule the sovereign people by means of constant persuasion, rhetoric is absolutely central. Yet democratic citizens tend to be deeply suspicious of political rhetoric, regarding it as either the empty words of deceitful politicians or powerful language that may be used to subvert legitimate democratic institutions and processes. Rhetoric is thus of paramount importance while appearing either useless or pernicious.

We must be clear here that when we speak of ‘democracy’ we are talking about it under the aspect of its most fundamental principle, popular sovereignty. Existing democracies come of course in many forms, each embodying specific theoretical norms and bearing particular institutional and cultural histories that may significantly affect local rhetorical practices. In spite of such diversity, we argue that any political culture that supports and fosters a genuinely democratic ethos will be shaped by a peculiar and enduring tension between the idea of leadership and the ideal of popular sovereignty. The distinctively democratic ambivalence about leadership that this tension produces also tends to cast suspicion on leadership rhetoric. It is true that democracies, like all regimes, support different forms of rhetoric for different occasions, as we will also argue. But in everyday matters, the suspicion of leadership inevitably shapes and influences the style and nature of democratic speech, elevating

the importance of public discussion and deliberation while placing constraints upon leaders with respect to what they can say and how they must say it. Leaders who understand and observe these constraints, mastering the democratic style, acquire persuasive abilities that are indispensable to their leadership. Leaders who ignore the constraints, whether through over-confidence or naiveté, come swiftly to grief. Our central argument in this paper is that all democracies, irrespective of their specific character, are defined by a unique form of rhetoric, an art of artless persuasion that necessarily presents itself as un-rhetorical, marking a concession to the authority of the sovereign people.

We begin by exploring the ambiguous place of rhetoric in democratic theory. We then discuss the two most important aspects of persuasive speech – the disposition of the listener and the trust to be placed in the speaker – as they manifest themselves in democratic politics. We look first at the unique qualities of the democratic audience that the leader must attempt to persuade, contrasting the different rhetorical styles that this audience will tolerate or demand on ordinary political as opposed to special ceremonial occasions. We then investigate the vital and difficult issue of trust that the democratic leader must continuously negotiate, looking especially at the crucial role of the media and the dangers courted by the democratic leader who tries too zealously to ‘manage’ this unpredictable ally-adversary. Indeed the dangers of media management clearly demonstrate how both necessary and difficult it is for leaders to sustain trust by mastering the artless art of democratic rhetoric.

The Ambiguous Legitimacy of Rhetoric in Democracy

Democracy is defined by its inclusiveness, that is, its ideal of equal citizenship. It may also be defined in terms of its institutions (reflecting direct, participatory or representative forms) or by its executive offices (whether parliamentary, semi-presidential or presidential). Often it is distinguished by its philosophical colouration – liberal democracy, social democracy, constitutional democracy and so on. What is common in all these understandings of democracy and remains fundamentally uncontested is the core premise that in democracies the people rule.

What precisely this means in practice is perennially open to question, which is what makes democracy an essentially contested concept. Even so, any conception of democracy that tries to dispense with the idea of popular sovereignty becomes, by

definition, undemocratic. It follows that, although the institutional, historical, cultural and religious character of each democracy will give it a unique character, the foundational notion of popular sovereignty must provide important insights into its political life. We claim that this can be demonstrated in the way rhetoric is normally understood and employed in democracies.

Rhetoric is primarily a form of persuasive speech, even if that speech is often accompanied by non-verbal forms of communication – music, visuals, actions.¹ Historically, rhetoric was regarded as the essential political art and given a pre-eminent place in higher education.² Today it simply does not make an appearance in most university curricula, at least not as a distinct subject for scholarly examination. If it is addressed at all it is indirectly as an aspect of communication and media courses, legal studies on free speech, cultural studies, or the study of specific institutions such as parliament or the presidency. Even when a discipline does give close scholarly attention to the subject, as recent deliberative theory has done, rhetoric retains an essentially ambiguous character (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 2002).³

And yet this art of persuasive speech is essential to democratic government. Why then is it often treated so dismissively? The familiar expression, ‘It’s just rhetoric’ implies that rhetoric is ‘only’ words – fine and fancy words carrying an aura of sweet reason, perhaps, but basically empty or insubstantial. The underlying sentiment seems to be that speech and reason are epiphenomenal upon the brute, irrational forces that *really* shape politics – the imperatives of power, interests, economics. If they have any effect or function at all it is simply to cover in beautiful garlands the ulterior motives of untrustworthy politicians who employ deceptive ‘spin’ to maintain themselves in office. On this reading, people are sceptical of rhetoric because they have concluded it is useless or unreliable.

On the other hand, there is a contrary fear that rhetoric is not, after all, ‘just words,’ but rather a formidable means of wielding power. As Francis Bacon put it, ‘the ancient politiques in popular states were wont to compare the people to the sea,

¹ On ‘illocutionary’ or ‘speech acts’ see Austin (1962).

² On the history of rhetoric see Kennedy (1986). Note especially the difference between classical ‘persuasion’ and Christian ‘proclamation’ (in the form of apologetics, polemics, and preaching, especially exegesis and *homilia*: Kennedy 1986, 120-160). On modern perspectives generally see Foss et al. (2002).

³ Deliberative democrats advocate discussion and debate that will promote greater involvement by the people in political decision-making (Dryzek 1990 and 2000; Habermas 1996; Guttman and Thompson 1996; Benhabib 1996; Cohen 1989). Their emphasis on deliberation therefore makes them suspicious of the persuasive power of rhetoric: see Uhr (1998, 21-29); Garsten (2006, 187-194).

and the orators to the winds; so the people would be peaceable and tractable, if the seditious orators did not set them in working and agitation' (Bacon 1861, 171). Rhetoric here takes the form of powerful, emotive oratory or propaganda, the chief tool of the demagogue or potential tyrant who would manipulate the people to overthrow conventional and constitutional checks on leadership. It is what Rottinghaus (2008) calls 'crafted talk' that uses alluring language to manipulate people into accepting a politician's preferred policy. On this view, people are naturally suspicious of rhetoric because they know themselves to be dangerously susceptible to it.

Neither view of rhetoric – that it is at best useless and at worst dangerous – casts it in a particularly flattering light. Yet even a cursory reflection reveals rhetoric's central and crucial role in a democracy. Because democracy is founded on the principle of popular sovereignty, it requires the steady maintenance of public deliberation, debate, and a calling to account of officialdom for its actions and omissions. It assumes and relies on free public speech to formulate questions, to defend or criticise policy, and to evaluate courses of action. Democratic leaders have no choice but to use rhetoric to frame the debate on policy choices and thereby try to shape public opinion (Nelson 2004; Garsten 2006).

Herein lies a core conundrum of democratic leadership. As democrats we demand, contradictorily, that our leaders be faithful servants who do our bidding but that they nevertheless demonstrate strong and capable leadership. This permanent ambiguity compels democratic leaders to assume a posture of habitual deference to the sovereign people even when they are undertaking strong acts of leadership. It obliges them to explain, with all due humility, the reasons for such acts in terms that will secure majority support. Those who neglect this necessity, supposing their talent and evident superiority gives them a natural right to govern, sooner or later get their political comeuppance. Democratic leaders cannot, like authoritarian ones, rely on fear of their own person or power to command obedience but must lead through the difficult art of persuasion.⁴ The practice of rhetoric is thus inextricably woven into the very fabric of a modern democracy, even while political rhetoric remains permanently stigmatized within it.

⁴Of course, leaders may use a *rhetoric of fear* – for example of terrorists etc – to persuade.

This tension places severe constraints on leadership rhetoric and induces a distinctive *democratic* rhetoric that denies it *is* rhetoric – what we here call the art of artless persuasion. The nature of this ‘artless art’ and its implications for leadership in democracies can be better appreciated if we note the challenges that democratic leaders face in attempting to master it. Obviously, they must try to appear trustworthy if their attempts to persuade their constituents are not to falter or fail. But to demonstrate trustworthiness, especially through the distorting lenses of modern media, requires great skill. To master this skill, a leader must understand both the nature of democratic trust and the passionate character of the democratic population that he or she addresses. Before treating closely the vital question of trust, we will look first at the importance for democratic rhetoric of understanding the fundamental attitudes that characterize the democratic disposition.

Rhetoric, Passion and the People

According to early Greek rhetoricians, rhetoric meant mastering a form of argumentation that would assure victory in the courts and in politics more generally. The rhetors and the sophists claimed to be able to teach such rhetoric, and some won fame and wealth by their lessons. Their high fees were justified, they said, because they could show their students how to win victory in the law courts by making the ‘weaker argument stronger,’ and how to acquire political domination by employing the art of persuading the many.⁵ Aristotle argued, however, that the rhetoricians placed too much emphasis on argument while leaving unexamined two other important elements that helped render speech persuasive: the character of the speaker, and the nature of the audience.⁶ Mathematical or geometric arguments or proofs have a persuasive force irrespective of the character of the instructor or the passions of the student. Persuasive political speech, on the other hand, requires that speakers be capable of inspiring trust and that they understand the passionate dispositions of their listeners. Audiences will always judge the force of a speech in

⁵ According to Garsten (2006) it was the pernicious role of rhetoric in the Greek courts that Aristotle sought to moderate by instituting a new ‘art’ of rhetoric. On the ‘cosmetic’ nature of rhetoric and its ambiguous place in politics see Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Protagoras* and *Phaedrus*.

⁶ What Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* calls the *ethos* (1356a1-13) and *pathos* (1356a14-16). Cicero in his *De Oratore* describes it as *probare*, *delectare*, *flectere* (to prove, to delight, to stir). Quintilian adopts this formulation, which assumes importance in Augustine’s discussion of Christian eloquence (see Kennedy 1986, 100). On a modern reassessment see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2003), Garsten (2006).

large part by their judgment of the character and trustworthiness of the speaker, and effective speakers will always adjust their message according to their assessment of the character and disposition of an audience. Assessing whether the hearer is fearful, angry, sympathetic or indifferent is critical in deciding how to frame an argument, what to appeal to, and what to avoid.

Appeal is thus always made, subtly or overtly, to the ‘passionate’ or ‘emotional’ element as well as to the ‘rational,’ and indeed it is not possible completely to separate these elements in political discourse. Political speeches are never simply instructional or demonstrative. They always have a normative intent to move an audience toward one view or course of action rather than another, and normative reasoning can never be without at least a tincture of emotion as something consequential is presumed to hang upon acceptance or non-acceptance. When issues touch closely on people’s hearts and lives, responses are necessarily passionate. Understanding the disposition and sensitivities of a particular listener, or the different dispositions and sensitivities of multiple listeners, is thus always important and relevant.

The task for democratic leaders who must persuade in order to lead is to understand in general terms the passionate disposition of the people they are elected to serve. Clearly such assessment must inevitably take into account the political, cultural and religious histories of particular democracies. The allusions, tone, vehemence and structure of speech and argumentation will inevitably be affected by all those unique commonalities that distinguish one democracy from another.⁷ It will also be heavily influenced by the varying nature of governmental institutions – presidential systems may allow, and occasionally demand, more grandiloquence than parliamentary systems. The nature of the office the leader holds – its character, rank and authority – will also make an important difference to the rhetorical strategies adopted. For example, a president or prime minister will be obliged to deploy different rhetorical tropes from a leader of the opposition or a minority leader, who usually enjoys greater rhetorical liberty precisely because lacking responsibility for government.⁸

⁷ Contrast, for example, the nature of rhetoric in America (Murphy 2003; Lim 2002); Britain (Phillips 1996; Lyttelton 2009), and Canada (Bashevkin 2009). For a ‘cross-cultural’ review more generally see Kennedy (1998).

⁸ On the importance of office and its implications for democratic leadership see Philp 2007.

All these factors are significant in shaping democratic rhetoric and as such are worthy of study, but they are not our concern here. We are interested in the two central features of democracy that will be found amidst all the variety. The first, already noted, is the principle of popular sovereignty, which implies that the people be treated always with deference and respect; the second is the inclusive nature of democracy which inevitably produces a disparate democratic audience, complicating the leader's task of deciding who should be most attended to. We will look at each in turn.

Popular sovereignty

The overriding element that decisively shapes democratic rhetoric is the principle of popular sovereignty, which enshrines the people's attachment to democratic equality. Anger and indignation will be directed against anyone who seems to undermine this principle, either by benefiting unjustly from public office, by breaking the laws, or by appearing to advocate a shift in the foundations of the regime. Though people of exceptional ability or wealth may be greatly admired in a democracy, attempts to introduce ability or wealth as *principles of rule* will be rightly regarded as undemocratic and intolerable. It is taken for granted in Australia, for example, that the aristocratic bearing and substantial wealth of a Malcolm Turnbull (however much he may protest the actual humbleness of his background) is more of an impediment than an advantage to his national leadership ambitions, one that is not necessarily fatal but must nevertheless be managed and overcome.

The people's sovereignty in a representative democracy may seem highly compromised, but the principle remains as a constant rebuke to those who would usurp or undermine it. An explicit denial of popular sovereignty by leaders or elites in a functioning democracy is practically unthinkable whatever the actual distribution of power, which is why the principle continues to exert a profound influence on leadership rhetoric. The effects can be seen most plainly in the language permitted to democratic leaders, or rather in the constraints imposed upon their language as they attempt to lead by persuasion.

Rhetoric in democracies does not generally demand ornate 'rhetorical' flourish of the kind associated with high, aristocratic culture. All modern democracies descend from non-democratic regimes and thus come trailing vestiges of monarchic, aristocratic and other styles that may affect rhetorical practice, but it is notable how

markedly these practices change as regimes become more democratic. Even the first great modern democracy, the American, in its formative years nursed high republican ideals of dignified, statesmanlike rhetoric that eschewed popular ‘pandering.’ It took the democratic genius of a Lincoln with his plain-speaking but nevertheless eloquent style to break the mould. Later, the ‘fireside’ radio chats of (the patrician) Franklin Roosevelt established a new norm of friendly informality that implicitly denied the significance of rank and inaugurated what came to be known, somewhat ironically, as the ‘rhetorical presidency’ (meaning one that gained authority by deigning to speak directly and simply to the people, thus effectively bypassing institutions like Congress and political parties).⁹

Thus as regimes become more democratic, the tendency to reject ‘oratorical’ speech altogether predominates, except on special, ceremonial occasions (or perhaps times of great crisis). In an advanced democracy it is generally enough if a speaker uses the common language (which will obviously vary with the idiom, traditions and vernacular of each democracy). High-flown rhetoric that openly displays a speaker’s knowledge, wisdom and talents is suspect as betraying arrogance and feelings of superiority. Democratic rhetoric is typically informal, unstudied, apparently spontaneous and rather mundane, persuasive precisely because it is ‘un-rhetorical.’ Speakers must never seem, by their tone, concepts or language to be ‘speaking down’ to the people, or showing contempt for their intelligence. Nor must they seem patently pandering or falsely flattering, for it is equally contemptuous to assume that the people can be easily gulled. Democratic rhetoric, like democratic leadership itself, must be relatively inconspicuous, almost invisible.

John Howard, as Australia’s Prime Minister, was particularly adept at this form of rhetoric, taking great pains to appear (both in speech and appearance) a deeply ordinary person— ‘a dull suburban solicitor,’ as he put it. Though never less than clear and articulate, he rarely waxed eloquent. In fact his delivery was typically mundane, even bland, serving admirably to lower the temperature on controversial issues and make them more politically manageable. Howard was persuasive because he seemed not to be trying too hard to persuade, but merely to be stating the facts. Such extraordinary ordinariness is less easy than it seems, as his successor Kevin

⁹ On the rhetorical presidency, see Tulis (1987); Edwards (1983); Kernell (1986); Ellis (1998). Other descriptions, as Tulis (1998, 211) notes, include ‘plebiscitary leadership’ (Lowi 1985; Ceaser 1979); ‘going public’ (Kernell 1997); the ‘sound’ of leadership (Hart 1987); the ‘public presidency’ (Edwards 1983) or the ‘spectacle’ of leadership (Miroff 1988).

Rudd discovered when trying to steer a difficult course between the erudite and the vulgar. Rudd's attempts to seem an 'average bloke' through the use of 'accidental' expletives, or dated, sometimes misquoted colloquialisms ('Blind Freddy'; 'fair shake of the sauce bottle'; 'fair dinkum'), rang false, and in doing so revealed their essential artfulness. When criticised on that account (Megalogenis 2009), Rudd had the good democratic sense to make fun of himself and extend the joke, unleashing what was virtually a national day of Australianisms in the media and thus recovering from his misstep.

Rudd was at his best on more solemn occasions in which speech is typically intended to be symbolic or demonstrative rather than persuasive.¹⁰ This form of speech is essential in a democracy, as in all other regimes, when solemnity is required, or when the nation must be seen to speak with one voice. The two forms of rhetoric must be clearly separated in practice, however, for if they are inadvertently intermingled or juxtaposed the effects on the democratic sensibility can be quite jarring. An instructive example occurred in February 2008, when Rudd used the opening of parliament to issue an historic apology to Indigenous peoples for past injustices by the dominant culture. Rudd's words were simple, eloquent, uncompromisingly frank and patently sincere, bringing a solemn emotional hush upon the listening nation. They were intended to signal the symbolic end of one historical era and the dawn of another forged in new unity. But Rudd's speech was followed by a response from Brendon Nelson, then leader of the Liberal-National coalition which, though it had steadfastly refused to say 'sorry' as a matter of principle when in power, had been persuaded by weight of popular opinion to join the government in a show of bipartisan agreement. Because the speech was delivered in parliament, however, Nelson mistook the occasion for a common political one rather than the essentially religious ceremony that it was (albeit one aimed at high political consequences). His words, designed to appease unreconciled sections of his own party, equivocated uncomfortably between apology for, and justification of past actions by whites. Aboriginal attendees turned their backs and chanted, while the bulk of the nation felt the sense of historic occasion had been spoiled. In the wake of this speech, Nelson's already low approval ratings plummeted to single digits.

¹⁰ What Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (1259b-1362a) calls *epideictic* rhetoric, that is, praising or blaming.

On everyday political occasions, on the other hand, democratic leaders must try to display wisdom without show or glibness, employing a tone of directness, soberness and prudence that reveals a central concern for ordinary people. Democratic rhetoric persuades best when it talks neither down nor up, but sounds like plain facts from a transparently reliable source. Democratic leaders, however, find that presenting themselves as such reliable sources is a labour of considerable and constant difficulty. One of the main reasons is that ‘the people’ to whom they must make appeal, and whose sensitivities they must guard, do not constitute a singular entity. The fact that the democratic populace exists in a variety of sections and constituencies inevitably complicates the leader’s persuasive task and raises quite sharply the problem of trust.

Democratic inclusiveness

The democratic disposition is neither simple nor singular thanks primarily to the ‘inclusiveness’ of democratic regimes. Once the franchise has expanded beyond aristocratic foundations of birth and the oligarchic basis of wealth, all adult men and eventually women and the young become entitled to take an active part in politics. This democratic inclusiveness means that the leader, in speaking to the people, has necessarily to look beyond older males, the traditional source of authority in other regimes, to accommodate a wider audience with a broader range of emotions, habits and dispositions. The democratic rhetorician must take into account differences between men and women,¹¹ and especially between the rich and poor.¹²

Aristotle tells us in the *Rhetoric* (II, xii-xiii) that the old, having lived many years, made many mistakes, and been often deceived by others, tend to be more cautious, hesitant and suspicious. They are less generous because they know how hard it is to get things and how easy to lose them. They therefore tend to value the useful above the noble. Anticipating evil, they are less bold than the young and less hopeful, living more in the past than the future. The young are the opposite, filled with desire and ready to act upon it, passionate and impulsive, ambitious for honour and glory, contemptuous of the vulgar desire for mere money. Living in the future, not the past, they tend to be courageous and full of hope, inclined to the noble rather than the

¹¹ See, for example, Miroff (2000, 83-124) who argues that democratic leaders have to be both male and female, that is, compassionate, consultative and caring yet tough.

¹² That democracy is an inclusive regime means that the idea of popular rule becomes in practice the rule of the poor, simply because there are more poor than rich.

calculating. They think they know everything and are willing to affirm it (*Rhetoric II*, xii-xiii). Therefore, while leaders in other regimes are accustomed to speaking to the old, appealing to their sense of calculation, caution, fear and suspicion, democratic leaders have to take into account the character of this younger audience, acknowledging the importance of noble sentiments, speed, energy, expedition and generosity (Yack 2006).¹³

A fascinating modern demonstration of this was provided in the United States during the long campaign for the Democratic caucuses and primary elections of 2008. The contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton became centrally framed as one between change and experience, hope and hard work, inspiration versus perspiration. Obama's appeal to the young, whom he mobilised in unprecedented numbers, was undeniable. He promised healing and renewal, a reaching out across the partisan divide, a revived America with its sense of honour, rightness and historic reputation restored after the moral sully of the Bush years. Clinton ridiculed inspiration as so much hot air and offered instead competence, security, a steady hand on the tiller, and detailed policies to address America's rising economic fears and woes. Her appeal was especially strong among older women and blue-collar Democrats deeply worried about work, wages and mortgages.

Overlaid upon and complicating this fundamental division between youth and maturity in this campaign was the issue of identity representation, race being the salient factor for Obama, gender for Clinton. Pundits immediately analysed the result of every caucus and primary to see which segments of the population were going with which candidate. The modern science of 'demographics' thus gave eloquent testimony to the fragmentation caused by democratic inclusiveness, as the candidates struggled to amass the delegates needed for victory by persuading sufficient numbers of disparate constituents to support their cause. Anne Applebaum (2007), monitoring the debates of candidates in this race, inveighed against 'the infuriating blandness of political speech' typified by vacuous generalities and phrases of 'unique pointlessness.' Yet this seems to be an inevitable consequence of democratic politics. Candidates want, naturally, to present themselves as strong leaders who are firm on policy, yet their campaigns are usually dominated by the need not to offend any particular, strategic

¹³ On the different voting behaviour of the young and old see Le Duc et al. (2002, chapter 7 and 9); Klingemann and Fuchs (1998, chapter 2 and 3).

constituency. The common result is rhetoric that is notable for its platitudes and moral blandness.

No doubt such traits are especially prominent during electoral campaigns when winning or losing office is at stake, but what is revealed is a fundamental tendency of democracy (especially in the era of the ‘permanent’ campaign). Democratic leaders have no choice but to shape their rhetoric to prevailing circumstances. They must attempt to woo some sections deemed winnable, defy others who are intractable enemies, placate some who are dangerous, convince many who are sceptical, all this via media which have as much interest in the trivial as the important and which, when the chips are down, will withdraw any previous support and give it to competitors. All of this demands constant, careful calculation by the savvy democratic leader, for any slip may be extremely costly. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that democratic politicians seem so seldom to say what they really mean or to mean what they actually say. The price we pay for freedom and inclusion is the problem of democratic trust, the central problem to which we now turn.

Leadership, Trust and Persuasion

In political regimes characterised by commands, orders and instructions rather than deliberation and debate, the question of trust is generally transposed into a question of fear. If fear is deeply instilled, an order may be conveyed with the slightest and subtlest of emphases.¹⁴ In democracies, founded on persuasion instead of fear, the issue of sustaining trust becomes crucial in a way that it is not in authoritarian regimes. But sustaining trust in a democracy is permanently problematic (Kernell 1997, 179-212). A long running theme of ‘democratic deficit’ theorists is that democratic citizens are actively withdrawing from political involvement today because they do *not* trust their political leaders.¹⁵

The traditional institutional solutions offered by liberal constitutionalism to the problem of trust include: requiring that the decisions and actions of governors conform to safeguarding laws and procedures; reinforcing personal integrity with institutions of external accountability; and distributing and separating powers among

¹⁴ Stalin had merely to note, in a Central Committee resolution of August 14, 1946, that the ‘literary-artistic journals published in Leningrad, *The Star* and *Leningrad*, carry themselves perfectly unsatisfactorily’ to start a wholesale cultural purge that lasted until 1952: see Ulam 1973, 643-652; Swayze (1962); Tökés (1975).

¹⁵ See generally Inglehart (1977); Putnam (2000); Blais et al. (2004); Gidengil et al. (2004); Goot (2000); McAllister (2003); Gollop (2004).

branches of government to create checks and balances. Yet negative accountability restraints, while necessary, cannot foster or assure properly responsible government – not doing wrong is different from doing right or well. And even in governments where such safeguards are long and well entrenched, and where they have been supplemented by self-administered codes of conduct and ethics, the problem of trust remains acute (see Uhr 2005).

It goes without saying that a democratic leader can never simply demand unconditional trust. Any request to ‘just trust me’ will inevitably arouse suspicion because it is a plea to ignore the democratic requirement for explanation and justification, and thus an attempt to evade accountability. The people rightly demand explanation of all leadership opinions, policies and actions. Just as importantly, leaders must provide explanations in a fashion that demonstrates the soundness of their democratic credentials.

This is seldom easy, partly because the legitimacy of democratic leaders rests unsteadily on three different and contradictory forms of representation: mirror, agency, and trusteeship (Pitkin 1967; Manin 1997). In mirror representation electors choose leaders who resemble them in some fashion on the assumption that they will effectively represent people whose identity and interests they share (which is why this is also called ‘identity’ representation). In agency representation the elected person does not necessarily resemble me, or share my interests, but will nevertheless represent me faithfully as my ‘agent.’ Such a representative, being under permanent instruction to present my views and defend my interests in the governmental arena, appears more a servant than a leader. The trustee representative is, in Edmund Burke’s famous account, the person of genuine leadership who firmly pursues the good as he or she sees it, in the best interests of the electors, even if occasionally opposing their specific instructions.

Leaders inevitably face a difficult task establishing their trustworthiness if they are compelled to satisfy simultaneously the conflicting expectations to which these differing bases of legitimacy give rise. Leaders who change policy direction because polls seem to favour it (who can therefore be argued to be acting as obedient servants of the people’s wishes) are charged with being spineless flip-floppers. Others who defy public sentiment and seek to do what is ‘right’ in their own view are accused of being undemocratic, of having grown ‘out of touch’ with the people, their

sense of common identity eroded by the arrogance of high office (Kane 2007; Patapan 2008).

Leaders may successfully negotiate these legitimacy traps and gain democratic trust by displaying their moral authority and showing due deference to the authority of the people. They may endorse recommended measures as protecting the weak or advancing the public good, or as denying particular special interests that tend to usurp popular sovereignty. For example, as Kernell (1997, 263) notes in the case of America, modern presidents gain a special legitimacy when they can successfully portray themselves as defending the public interest from private greed. Successful democratic leaders constantly reassure the people that they have not grown out of touch in their feelings and opinions, that they always remain the people's devoted servants, and that they will use their best judgment to advance the people's true interests, on the explicit understanding that if they judge wrongly, even if honestly, they will expect to be properly chastised at election.

Such deference is, of course, merely a necessary and not a sufficient condition for maintaining popular trust. Many other factors complicate the leader's efforts at persuasion, not least the already noted fact that 'the people' are divided into multiple segments issuing multiple demands that cannot all be met. Leaders must necessarily promise to be for all the people all the time but unavoidably find themselves satisfying some while placating others, or satisfying none entirely while trying to placate all. Their task is not helped by the democratic requirement of free speech. In contrast to dictatorial regimes, democracy discourages a single, one-way channel of communication between leader and people. No democratic leader has a monopoly on persuasive speech, so all attempts at public persuasion are liable to be muted or countered by competing arguments, especially as democracies generally mandate political parties whose aim is office and whose purpose is permanently to challenge the party in power. Nor is the possibility of dissent limited to party competition, for it necessarily extends universally as a general principle of democracy. If the people are sovereign, then democratic speech is bound to issue in a multitude of voices competing for the sovereign's ear (Kane et al. 2009, 1-12; Kane and Patapan 2008).

The democratic leader must learn to tolerate and even profess love for this freedom, not just in institutions like parliaments where freedom of speech is virtually unrestrained under doctrines of parliamentary privilege. Free speech cannot be confined to certain sites or institutions. It implies an extensive free media (free at least

in the sense of being not controlled by government). The communicative media constitute both a useful means and an ever present threat for democratic leaders, who must of necessity learn to employ the means without succumbing to the threat. Yet, ironically, the more successful leaders seem to be in ‘managing’ the media, the more danger they court. Indeed the modern media provide a valuable case study that reveals most acutely the difficulties leaders face as they try to master the artless art of democratic rhetoric.

The Media and Democratic Rhetoric

The technological advances that have led to a multiplication of the means of modern communication present distinctive opportunities and challenges for democratic leaders.¹⁶ Leaders must use the various media as effective channels of persuasion while being aware that they represent a countervailing set of interests that may as easily undermine their purposes as support them.

The advantages to democratic leaders of the proliferation and increasing sophistication of communicative means are obvious. They afford the ability to speak directly and even intimately to large numbers of citizens simultaneously. The increasing speed and availability of travel, along with the ubiquity and immediacy of the modern media, have had radical effects on leadership practice in all democracies.¹⁷ Leaders can now roam the globe knowing that their foreign triumphs (or failures) will be instantly transmitted to a domestic audience. No matter where on earth they are, they are kept close to home by a willing press that enables them to address their fellow citizens directly on pressing domestic issues. The sheer omnipresence of the media, and their natural concentration on the leader, has tended to elevate the leader’s status even in parliamentary systems of democracy, a phenomenon labelled the ‘presidentialisation’ of Westminster-style politics (see generally Foley 2000).

Useful as ready access to such media is for a leader, the 24/7 nature of the public scrutiny and the increasing swiftness of the news cycle present constant challenges and political dangers that are extremely wearing physically and emotionally. Leaders have few opportunities for a break from ‘coverage,’ and must

¹⁶ On the major transitions, from printing, to the telegraph, broadcasting, television, and most recently the web and the digital revolution see Gordon (1977), Thorbourn and Jenkins (2003).

¹⁷ As Kernell (1997, 124-127) notes, strategic travelling was made possible by advances in international travel.

survive in an environment over which they have, at best, limited control. They require a small army of press secretaries, advisers and minders to help manage it in any ordered fashion. They must be constantly alert for questions or crises that pop up from nowhere, demanding immediate responses in the full glare of the camera lights. A misspoken word or a touch of impatience and anger will be swiftly transmitted around the world and endlessly replayed on YouTube. Bad news, they say, now travels at 'warp speed' (Farhi 2008). And in all this the media are not simply innocent channels of communication, nor mere instruments, but complicit partners. Leaders must deal with the collective media, not simply as an opportunity to be exploited, but as a potential adversary with the independence to check their own claims, reveal their secrets and counter their actions.

Leaders know that the scrutiny to which they are constantly subjected is never wholly disinterested. Democratic media have been said to constitute a 'Fourth Estate' (Carlyle 1905) or 'public sphere' (Habermas 1989) with a crucial role in guarding the democracy and defending the public interest, but most of the organs of the 'established' media are also commercial enterprises intent on continued profitability. If sensation and triviality sell better than deep and sober analysis then the former will be favoured, to the detriment of the public discourse and the health of the democracy. Moreover, frenetic attempts by media players to capture public attention amidst the multiple-media cacophony tend to degrade rather than facilitate public communication. The trademark of modern media, it is said, is style over substance, visuals over reasoned debate, the 'ten-second grab' over considered discussion. The public is treated less as citizenry than as consumers of 'infotainment,' which disregards standards of public good and excludes important minority perspectives (Keane 1991; Rubin 1977; Lichtenberg 1990). And even when media businesses do have a serious agenda they are likely, some argue, to be peddling systemic propaganda aimed at reinforcing and defending the status quo (Chomsky and Herman 1994). Meanwhile the virtually unregulated flow of publication, information, disinformation, scandal, rumour and innuendo that washes through blogsites and other internet forums is argued to represent either a healthy democratization of the media

or, alternatively, an unfortunate delivery of the means of discourse into the hands of the most unreliable, cranky or malevolent of citizens.¹⁸

Leaders thus have unprecedented opportunities for exercising persuasive speech, but in a media environment that is inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable. The relationship between leaders and media is inevitably a complex one combining common interest with mutual distrust. Democratic leaders must get their message across while avoiding the undue and disabling distortion that a hostile or superficial media is capable of inflicting. This means they have really no choice but to become alert and sophisticated ‘managers’ of the media, even while trying to avoid the appearance of manipulative calculation. Media management is, by its nature, an extremely ‘artful’ practice, and its necessity exacerbates the already difficult leadership problem of achieving rhetorical artlessness in democracies.

This heavily managed artlessness is extremely difficult to carry off consistently. The dangers are numerous and subtle. On the one hand, a government that shows lack of sophistication with modern media will be derided as hopelessly out of touch. This was demonstrated when John Howard made particularly amateurish use of YouTube in an effort to reach young voters during the 2007 election campaign. The Rudd government, on other hand, has been accused of being too clever by half. Its extensive use of media advisers and public relations consultants, its deployment of focus group tested phrases (‘working families’, ‘global economic crisis’), its attempts to undermine the influence of the press gallery, and its insistence that the PM’s office exercise oversight over all press releases, all indicate the degree to which Rudd has tried to centralise and control information. It was not surprising, then, that he should sooner or later be accused of being more concerned with style than with substance, or guilty of outright cynicism (Callaghan and Warne-Smith 2009).¹⁹

It is instructive that Rudd used Tony Blair as his model for modern democratic politics. The experience of Blair in Britain had already shown that being *too* clever with the media can easily backfire, creating serious problems of trust. Indeed Blair marks an object lesson for all democratic leaders attempting to manage their message effectively. He was acknowledged as a consummate media ‘performer,’ informal but

¹⁸ For the scholarship on the internet see, for example, Bimber (2003); Chadwick (2006). On blogs see Anderson et al. (2006); Davis (2005); Keren (2006).

¹⁹ For example, the opposition and the media condemned Rudd and his Treasurer Wayne Swann for refusing to state on TV or radio the size of the 2009 budget deficit in case it would subsequently be used against them in election campaigns.

highly articulate and absolutely convinced of his power to persuade. One aide commented: ‘Tony is a great persuader. He thinks he can convert people even when it might seem as if he doesn’t have a cat’s chance in hell of succeeding. Call him naive, call it what you will but he never gives up’ (cited in Kampfner 2003, 127). But in time Blair’s very facility with language and his eagerness to persuade were themselves perceived as a problem, ironically undermining his persuasiveness. Doubts arose about the lengths to which he was prepared to go to ensure that his message reflected back on his government to put it in the most positive light (Seldon and Kavanagh 2005).

Blair placed unusual emphasis on media management from the very beginning, and the issue of ‘spin’ that dogged his tenure was largely a result of his ‘New Labour’ strategy for ‘handling the media.’ Having grasped the centrality of communication in democratic politics but harbouring deep suspicion of the press and media generally, he and his press secretary, Alistair Campbell (who became Director of Communications strategy in 2000), transformed news management during his first term of office. They concentrated control in Number 10 Downing Street and adopted a highly professional approach that included the establishment of a Strategic Communications Unit to co-ordinate government announcements. They politicised news management, allowing Campbell to give orders to civil servants and to appoint special advisors (Kuhn 2005, 95-96).²⁰ The main elements of the media operation were spin, rebuttal, the development and dissemination of ‘lines to take,’ continuous media monitoring, the planting of good stories with trusted reporters and the denunciation of those who caused trouble. Heavy criticism would eventually compel Blair to moderate the actions of his spin machine, but the damage to credibility had already been done. Stothard (2003, 88) noted that some members of parliament had ‘moved from not believing Blair’s speeches to not bothering to read them.’

Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major, who had been silent since retirement, felt moved to speak out in a pamphlet entitled *The Erosion of Parliamentary Government*, in which he wrote: ‘New Labour’s obsession with spin, with style, with perception, has given it great presentational successes. But our political system has paid a high price as, on occasion, have its own most skilful practitioners. Slick presentation has proved the forerunner of distrust’ (Major 2003).

²⁰ For Campbell’s influence on Blair see Seldon (2004, 293-314). On ‘spin-doctoring’ in comparative perspective see Esser et al. (2000).

Upon Blair's resignation in 2007, social commentator A. A. Gill (2007) remarked that, although Blair was personable, straight, and had done his best, it all counted for naught, for he left office 'well and truly loathed. Loathed and mocked. Loathed, mocked and despised.' Blair, for his part, rather bizarrely blamed the media, which he claimed was a 'feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits' (Blair 2007). His outburst was greeted with bemusement by a British public grown cynical about his own devoted use of the media to spin his government's policies. Yet Blair himself drew the cautionary tale from his own experience, a difficult one for democratic leaders to digest: although they must necessarily devise media strategies to manage their message and preserve their ever-fragile legitimacy, the consequences of doing so too zealously or cleverly can be deeply counterproductive. Media management must be an art that conceals its own artfulness if it is not to fall foul of the strict demand that democratic rhetoric appear as plain, straightforward speech from an honest source.

The Artless Art

In May 2008, President Lee Myung Bak of South Korea, former CEO of Hyundai Engineering, a man known as 'the Bulldozer' who had been elected for his apparent strength, was suffering catastrophic approval ratings and admitted he was trying to adapt his hard-charging style to one more suited to a fractious democratic arena. He had been criticized for not listening to others, nor to the voice of the Korean people, and for simply going his own way. Korean academic Hahm Sung Deuk commented: 'Korea needs a leader who can compromise, negotiate and be persuasive to govern completely effectively. Lee should be playing the role of the broker rather than the commander' (cited in Schuman 2008, 34).

These are rules that democratic leaders everywhere must learn if they are to succeed. We have argued that democracy – understood under its most fundamental concept of popular sovereignty, an ideal that makes the legitimacy of the leadership role perpetually problematic – mandates an artfully artless form of rhetoric. As societies become increasingly democratised, leaving behind the vestiges of aristocratic or authoritarian pasts, the demand that leaders master this artless art inevitably grows more pressing. Though the precise contours of any democratic rhetoric may be strongly influenced by the particular history, culture and institutions of the democracy, and also vary somewhat with specific offices within the democracy,

these egalitarian pressures on leadership speech will nevertheless be increasingly felt. The ambiguous place of leadership in democracy inevitably imposes a necessary caution on leaders, constraining their persuasive speech toward the informal, casual, unstudied, inclusive, and apparently spontaneous. The language of command will not serve, nor will high-flown oratory except on rare or special occasions. Democratic peoples, though as susceptible as anyone to the charms of persuasive speech, are nevertheless inclined to distrust a speaker whose dazzling rhetoric makes them feel they are possibly being duped, looked down upon or played for fools.

Democracies thus impose a difficult burden on their leaders, expecting them to have special abilities to lead even while demanding they cloak those abilities in an aura of ordinariness. However talented they may be, and however conscious of their talent, they must conceal any hint of arrogance or superiority beneath a cloak of democratic humility. This requires an effort of sustained dissimulation that is most evident, we have argued, in the performative utterances of democratic rhetoric.

There is indeed some irony in the fact that democracies, while condemning all forms of deceit and lying, making truth the bedrock of the democratic process, nevertheless require a form of acting from their leaders, even as they scrutinise their characters hoping for utter sincerity and simplicity. Democratic rhetoric, though it is inevitably artful, too often will appear, if disclosed, as a vice that democracy finds scarcely tolerable – hypocrisy. The artless art is a subtle practice fraught with peril, the greatest being that the veil of artlessness be suddenly lifted to reveal the artful machinery at work beneath. This is what makes the business of media management in an age of exploding communicative means so important, so delicate, and so revelatory of both the centrality and difficulty of rhetoric in democracy.

When such perils are successfully negotiated, however, and democratic rhetoric achieves its persuasive aim, it brings the inestimable boon of reinforced legitimacy to leadership positions and actions that are constantly subject to critique and attack. The artless art is thus essential yet maligned, providing elegant testimony to both the inherent strengths and weaknesses of democratic leadership.

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