Introduction

1

A few years ago in my country there was a minor media storm. Newspapers began reporting the 'scandal' that some politicians had been hiring a speechwriter to draft their speeches. It became an issue on talkback radio; the speechwriter became a target of anger, and it culminated in headlines like: 'Another minister caught using a speechwriter'. That speechwriter was me.

This episode struck me as strange. After all, isn't making speeches what politicians are supposed to do? Aren't the politicians we love the most the ones who employ the best speechwriters? Isn't it the case that words can outlive deeds and inspire the best to run for office? What, after all, are the Kennedys and Martin Luther King today but a rich legacy of inspiration for a new generation? And don't the newspapers usually applaud loudly when a politician makes a speech that's intelligent, witty, surprising and inspiring? Those headlines seemed to me the equivalent of: 'surgeon caught buying sharper scalpel'.

Some time later, the same newspapers had another complaint: the dismal standard of oratory of modern politicians, especially the then Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, who in one prominent editorial was given '10 out of 10 for content, nought out of ten for delivery'. This happened in the United States and Britain too, where Republican presidential nominee John McCain was overshadowed by his own previously unknown running mate, and Gordon Brown was commonly voted the most boring public speaker in the nation – more boring even than the notoriously inarticulate football player David Beckham. This is a major problem: the inability to articulate a sense of purpose and direction and inspire others to follow can drain leaders, parties and governments of

energy and support, and cause much needed reform to fail. Why is it happening?

The answer, in part, is 'too much information'. Politicians today seem in thrall to contestable facts. Every generation is dominated by certain professions – our parents' by engineers and sociologists; ours by economists and pollsters. The effect has been to turn our elected representatives from leaders into technocrats. Afraid of being accused of sounding inauthentic or lightweight, or off-message, or spouting rhetoric, their words and eventually their own personalities become pre-programmed and predictable. Their speech drowns in their numbers and economic modelling. It's a failing compounded by a political backroom culture that makes it easy to get to the top without ever having mastered the art of oratory. Common to both left and right, this failing is robbing our democracy of energy, and the cost is paid in the wreckage of governments and political movements unable to enthuse their followers or provide an adequate riposte to their opponents. In Australia, even the hardest heads in the national press gallery agreed that Kevin Rudd's poor oratory contributed to his dramatic downfall and replacement as prime minister by the more engaging Julia Gillard.

This failure of the good to inspire too often leaves us with an invidious choice – between the dour and the demagogue. The choice should be unnecessary.

2

Why is there resistance today to good speechwriting and good oratory, especially when the appearance of a great speechmaker is always greeted with extraordinary public enthusiasm? Whenever a new one appears you can almost see the electorate bending towards the stage, eager for more.

The arguments against putting real effort into oratory – including the arguments against hiring speechwriters, once directed against me – come down to this: our politicians should always speak to us plainly, without artifice, and especially without their words being

written by others. This seems common sense, and, in a naïve way, even idealistic. But in an age when politicians commonly make two or three speeches in a single day, as well as actually run the country, is it practical to ask them to research and write them all themselves? More importantly, is it desirable?

This question may sound like special pleading from someone who makes his living by writing speeches for others, but it is in fact a question almost as old as democracy itself.

In 161 BC the Roman Senate decided that anyone caught writing speeches for others faced expulsion from the city. The senators were acting on a belief that originated in a famous philosophical debate some 250 years prior between members of the Platonic Academy and their rivals the Sophists. The former believed that political decisions should be based on the truth alone, guided by the advice of the best philosophers. The employment of experts to advise in the arts of persuasion, they reasoned, would potentially make 'the weaker argument the stronger' – something dangerous in the Athens of their day when matters of life and death were decided by majority vote in mass citizen assemblies. The latter, the Sophists, disagreed. More politically realistic, they recognised something we can all observe today: when it comes to politics, humans are swayed by emotion as much as by logic and facts.

As taxpayers, mortgage holders, shareholders and political advisers, we all have an interest in the logical presentation of facts, especially numbers with dollar signs attached to them. Presenting facts logically is an important part of successful political speechmaking. But as humans we need more. For good or ill, our minds respond to emotional stimulation. There's much more to our lives than the things we can count. The very existence of religion, for instance, shows that we want so much more: spiritual uplift, moral affirmation, inspiration, a quest. Our politicians need to give us these things; if they don't they are neglecting one-half of our brains and one-half of their job.

This observation is so obvious to most people that it hardly seems worth mentioning, but still so many politicians continue to

ignore it. Armed with consultancy reports as thick as telephone books and PowerPoint slide decks of increasing sophistication, they think the rational exposition of the facts alone will defeat the enemies of thoughtful progress or considered conservatism. And they are egged on by the (usually well-scripted and highly emotive) proponents of 'plain talking' and 'common sense' who dominate the airwaves and denounce the arts of persuasion as the spin practised by hollow apparatchiks. We are, it seems, in Athens once more, where the knowledgeable and the good are condemned to eternal defeat by the shallow and the bad.

Is there a way out?

The answer comes from Rome. In the first century BC, Rome witnessed a revival of classical rhetoric. As the increasingly anarchic republic, weakened by the assaults of populist demagogues, began to fall apart, the foremost orator and thinker of the day, Cicero, recognised that the defenders of the republic could only prevail if they first shed their moral qualms about appealing to the masses. He recognised that in the world in which we actually live, as opposed to the world that exists in the clouds sometimes inhabited by philosophers, the good may choose to ignore the arts of persuasion, but the bad certainly will not. Cicero believed his troubled times were ones for good people to wise up about the realities of popular opinion: that it was fickle, responsive to emotional stimulus, and could be won over by eloquence. The most knowledgeable and just people, he argued, had an obligation not just to be to smart and true, but also to become effective orators. Cicero's message was that persuasion need not mean hollow, cynical, confected spin; it can mean endowing truth, judgement and moral integrity with greater force.

3

This book is dedicated to Cicero's ideal. It addresses a question posed by a despairing newspaper commentator:

> How can intelligent, democratic politics survive when the best lack conviction and the worst monopolise passion? What hope for the civilising activity of politics when convictions are constantly trimmed and abandoned to meet the demands of the modern world's high-velocity media?

I come from the liberal or progressive side of politics, but my many conservative friends share the same concerns. So whether you are left or right, if you are worried about the threat to democratic politics posed by the screaming pedlars of cynicism and dishonesty, or equally concerned about the triumph of shallowness over substance, you have a duty to put your case more persuasively. This book aims to help.

It can be read in a number of ways:

- As the foregoing suggests, as a defence of oratory – with its potential to unite passion with substance and ethics in the name of democracy – against its detractors
- As a history of oratory and an attempt to understand how it has evolved – from classical times, via the genius of Renaissance writers such as Shakespeare, to the digital age
- As explanation of how oratory works – uncovering the simple components of the art of rhetoric to enable those accepting the noble call of public life to speak more effectively, and to arm the rest of us, plain citizens, with the ability to recognise when persuasion stops and demagoguery begins
- As a source of technical and practical lessons for the budding speechwriter.

As in any endeavour, it helps to examine success. The book therefore uses the insights provided by the classical authorities, notably Cicero himself, to analyse the great speeches in history. Bookshop shelves bend under the weight of collections of 'great', 'stirring', 'history-changing' speeches, but few explain how those speeches work and why they deserve those adjectives. Here, we break down the speeches we all know – by Socrates, Shakespeare's

most memorable orators, Winston Churchill, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King and many others, including characters from TV series like *The West Wing*, popular movies and novels – to show how their speechwriters connect with audiences, seize the moment, appeal to emotions, project the speaker's character, use facts convincingly and destroy their opponents' arguments to try to force the hand of history or create memorable drama.

Along the way I add some humble examples from my own speechwriting experience on the staff of political leaders to demonstrate how the lessons from the masters can be applied in practice.

In chapter 1 our story is bookended by two passionate debates: between Marcus Brutus and Mark Antony following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, and between Barack Obama or Sarah Palin in the US presidential campaign of 2008. Depending on your politics you will likely love or loathe Obama or Palin, but what no one can deny is their quality as orators. As we shall see throughout the book, the reason for this is that, in large part, they and their speechwriters follow the rules set out by the classical authorities.

The elements of classical and modern oratory are then discussed in chapters 3 to 7 – 'moment', style, emotion, character and evidence.

In chapter 8 we discuss the morality of speech and why writing and delivering great speeches is so important.

Then in chapter 9 we see how these elements of the DNA of oratory bring to life the most famous and influential speech of the modern era, the Gettysburg Address.

In chapter 10, drawing on my own experiences and those of the great contemporary speechwriters, we examine how speeches are written and how speechwriters are made.

We then conclude by considering who in the modern era can be regarded as Cicero's ideal orator.

Doubtless many will argue that I have neglected *their* favourite great speech. Everyone will have a slightly different list, but it's my hope that the analysis provided here enables everyone to look again

at his or her favourite oration and understand why it is so gripping, why it works.

The book is aimed at everyday people in their duties as citizens. It avoids academic controversies, not because it considers them trivial, but because, in the spirit of Cicero himself, I believe that significant ideas, especially those of practical political importance, can and must be grasped by everyone if our democracies are to survive and flourish.

Our story about oratory starts, as so many do, in the classical world.

Chapter 1
To save a republic

1

15 March 44 BC began tensely. Some four weeks before, the Senate, menaced by threatening mobs, had appointed the populist general Julius Caesar dictator for life. Now, in every place where people gathered – bath houses, market places, temples – the speculation was intense. Was this the end of the Republic that had lasted for more than four-and-a-half centuries? Would anyone stand up to save it and the liberties it guaranteed? Talk of assassination was common, but Caesar, scorning precautions, dismissed his guard and travelled in a simple litter to that day's scheduled meeting of the Senate in the Forum Romanum – a vast, rectangular meeting place, 200 metres long and 75 wide, bordered lengthwise by up-market shops and apartments, and endwise by government offices. At the northern end, dominated by a steep cliff leading to the Capitol Hill, stood the Tabularium (national archive); the Temple of Saturn (state treasury); the Temple of Concord; and the new Senate House (the old having been burnt down by rioting supporters of the murdered demagogue Publius Clodius eight years before). In

The Forum Romanum – the original speakers' forum, looking down from the Capitol where Brutus proclaimed liberty (the Rostra would have been middle left of the photograph). Photo: © F.C.G./Shutterstock.com.

front of the Senate House lay the Comitium, the political assembly ground where senators addressed citizens from the Rostra, the raised speaking platform made from the wooden prows of captured warships. Opposite, at the southern end of the Forum lay the Temple of Castor and Pollux, from which the tribunes addressed rowdy gatherings of the plebs, watched over by the club-wielding thugs of the city's various factions.

Caesar's view of Rome's heart would have been rather different to the one we are used to seeing in Hollywood movies; it was still ramshackle and brick, not yet replaced by the marble caricature of sham democracy that plutocracies prefer; Ridley Scott's computer-generated imperial city had yet to be built. The Forum – the epicentre of the Roman state – was still, above all else, a place dedicated to political speech. Riot, murder and factional mobs may have made it dangerous to enter, but in this arena the essence of classical democracy – persuasion – still had the potential to carry the day and, just possibly, change the future course of history, as Caesar's fatal entry to the Senate chamber was about to prove.

Stopped on his path to his ceremonial chair by Tillius Cimber, Caesar was hacked to death by some 60 aristocratic conspirators, 'falling', according to the historian Appian, 'neatly' at the foot of Pompey's statue. As the blood spread across the marble floor, the astonished senators, Rome, the world, held their breath.

Caesar's power had rested on money and violence. Now that he was dead the vacuum was to be filled by a more legitimate source of Roman power – oratory. Over the following three days in the Forum Romans witnessed an extraordinary rhetorical duel between deadly enemies: the assassins led by Marcus Junius Brutus, who wanted to re-establish a true republic; and the crude but effective master of horse, Mark Antony, who wanted to assume the dead dictator's powers.

It all started rather unheroically. Blood drenched and adrenalin charged after the killing, Brutus turned to the terrified senators standing astonished in the chamber and urged them to grasp their recovered freedom. But they fled and were joined by a panicked crowd rushing from games in the adjacent Theatre of Pompey. One can imagine the equivalent effect if a president or prime minister were to be gunned down outside a packed Super Bowl or an FA Cup Final. Undeterred, the conspirators rushed to the steps of the Capitol where, according to Plutarch, Brutus, brandishing his dagger over his head, proclaimed liberty. As the panic subsided and a crowd assembled, Brutus made a speech 'calculated to suit the occasion' and was applauded strongly, then urged to go down to the Rostra to address the city. There, Brutus spoke again, but his reassuring oratory was undone by the praetor Lucius Cornelius Cinna, who, misjudging the mood, violently denounced Caesar and was howled down. The assassins were then chased back up the hill, where they barricaded themselves into public buildings to think again.

Two days of tense negotiations followed.

> But on the 17th the Senate finally met. In a state of extraordinary tension it debated and passed a compromise motion that neither condemned the assassins nor declared