Have Modern Politicians Lost the Art of Rhetoric?
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BBC News
6 February 2015

When we listen to politicians, we often complain that their words don't seem to mean anything. And that's because they don't, explains Mary Beard for a BBC Newsnight report.

There's a mismatch between political ideas and politicians' words. It's not that the poor things don't have ideas - they're just not usually allowed to utter them.
The party machine is too risk-averse to countenance real speech.

In ancient Greece and Rome, on the other hand, the art of rhetoric was at the heart of political life.

Rhetoric can have a bad name, as if it means tricksy or deceptive speech. But the bottom line is it's a skill of using reasoned argument to persuade.

Recapturing some of that lost art might be a good idea, and might get us beyond pretty much indistinguishable soundbites.

Look at Ed Miliband’s speech at the Fabian New Year Conference in January. It's not even pretending to be an argument, but a series of slogans read from a teleprompter:

"I believe we succeed as a society when we move together, not drift apart."

"These are my basic beliefs, all underpinned by one idea: It is only when working people succeed, that Britain succeeds too."

"And because of these beliefs, I believe this is the most important election for a generation."

It's dreary stuff, and my bet is that someone helped him to write it too.

In ancient Rome, the historian Tacitus was dismissive of a speech given by the Emperor Nero, written by a clever speech writer. It was, he wrote, just "borrowed" words.

Well that is what we have now - borrowed words, or endlessly repeated ones. A phrase is thrown at us time and time again as if it was the party's message.

Take George Osborne as an example. He repeated the phrase "long-term economic plan" five times in December's Autumn Statement.

Nick Clegg thought he was onto a winner with "alarm clock Britain" - his description for the "squeezed-middle".

He was trying to appeal to us hard workers getting up early in the morning. But despite repeating it on several occasions, it never really took off.

He'd forgotten that most of us don't wake up to alarm clocks anymore - more likely some pre-selected music.

Sometimes, though, the political class hit on something catchy. Party leaders are tripping over themselves to help the nation's "hard-working families".
But, in my experience, it's a slogan everyone seems to hate.

That's partly because an awful lot of people don't think of themselves as a family, and "hard-working" has a dreadful smack of the workhouse about it.

While ancient Rome certainly didn't get it all right, its politicians were at least trying to persuade voters of a particular argument.

If persuasion isn't at stake, we may as well just vote on the basis of our own existing prejudices. Politicians need to think about how they can change people's minds, not just reflect what they already think.

In the 1960s, Labour MP Roy Jenkins was one of the most revolutionary home secretaries the UK has ever had. It might have been the swinging sixties, but the views of most voters were far from swinging.

Mr Jenkins needed to persuade people to sign up to the end of capital punishment and to decriminalize homosexuality.

He did not need voters to be overwhelmingly positive about what he wanted to do, but he did use argument to persuade them to at least accept it.

His speech on immigration - a hugely political issue in the 60s just as it is today - is a prime example:

"Let there be no suggestion...that immigration, in reasonable numbers, is a cross that we have to bear, and no pretense that if only those who have come could find jobs back at home our problems would be at an end."

Margaret Thatcher was certainly one who used borrowed words and slogans. But, for better or worse, she was a persuasive politician who invested a lot in the ideas and the argument.

In 1979, during her first speech as prime minister to the Tory party conference, she laid out the case for controlling the trade unions:

"Today, the conflict of interest is not so much between unions and employers, as between unions and the nation."

She went on to the solution:

"And that's why people are supporting us in legislatiing for trade union reform. We place special emphasis on the secret ballot."
She had practical proposals and was trying to persuade us to go with them.

I may be wrong, but I don't imagine any of that speech was written out in single sentences on a teleprompter.

Among all this sloganizing, I find myself thinking back to the Greek philosopher Socrates - or at least as Plato presented him.

He was about getting to the bottom of an argument. About not giving up on it. About facing his own ignorance and confronting his own prejudices.

Most of all, he was about having a real conversation.

As we approach the general election, the party machines must allow politicians to persuade us, the voters, to back their solutions - and not just make assertions or promises.

Then people might engage with them - they might have something to think about.

And that's why, if I could bring back just one thing from the ancient world, it would be the art of rhetoric - persuasion through argument.