# Where do you find it now?

Colin James, with guidance in part from Claire Robinson
Conference on Political Rhetoric
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> [A]mong friends and family we can cut some slack. We fill in one another's sentences. What we mean matters more than what we say. No such mercies occur in politics. In public life language is a weapon of war and is deployed in conditions of radical distrust. All that matters is what you said, not what you meant. The political world is a world of lunatic literalism. The slightest crack in your armour — between what you meant and what you said — can be pried open and the knife driven home. — Michael Ignatieff, "Getting Iraq wrong", *New York Times*, 5 August 2007, before he became leader of the Canadian Liberal party; quoted in White, Nicola, *Free and Frank. Making the Official Information Act 1982 work better* (Institute of Policy Studies, Wellington, 2007), p16

Michael Ignatieff was prophetic. The knife was driven home, into him, in this year's Canadian federal election on 2 May. The Liberals, for decades Canada's usual party of government, fell to 34 seats. Ignatieff lost his seat and immediately resigned the leadership. He had failed in the world of lunatic literalism where, he had told the New Yorker, "one word in the wrong place and you spend weeks apologising".[1] He was an academic (a professor at Harvard before going into Parliament). He was in politics under false pretences.[2]

And I am here under false pretences. When Jon Johansson asked me in February if I wanted to contribute I agreed as a way of prodding myself out of my usual hiding place in policy and the ideas behind policy and into a topic which most people think more relevant and important. Policy and its implementation and administration affect people's finances or wellbeing or opportunity or security far more (with rare exceptions) than rhetoric, personality, power plays, political argument, posturing and push-and-shove, though of course those phenomena influence policy. But those phenomena comprise the entertainment in politics and entertainment trumps policy in a modern developed-economy society in which necessities are available and machinery ameliorates most drudgery.

There is some interest in the substance of policy. The deputy chief executive of a major department told me my columns are the most discussed in that department. Around 1000 people have opted on to my email list. Business executives pay for my analyses because policy change can mean profits or losses. But they add up to a tiny minority. The *Dominion Post* dumped my column in May because a survey of readers told it what I wrote was "not relevant". Bryce Edwards' NZ Politics Daily blog exemplifies what *is* relevant: Politics Daily mostly highlights the politics of the moment and personality politics and treats policy mostly as a matter of the moment or as controversy.[3]

These are the democratic judgment of a major newspaper's readers and the erudite judgment of a political scientist. I think they are accurate judgments. They highlight the relevance of rhetoric in all its forms. It is those wider forms I want to explore.

I first repaired to my *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* which gave me this definition[4]: the art of using language to persuade or influence ... language calculated to persuade or impress; artificial, insincere or extravagant language.

It is easy to see from that that rhetoric and politics meld.

Rhetoric can be grand. Julius Caesar's "veni, vidi, vici" and Abraham Lincoln's "government

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of the people, by the people, for the people" at Gettysburg defined a powerful conquering nation and one resting on consent. Cicero's "delenda est Carthago", Winston Churchill's "blood, toil, tears and sweat" (echoing Garibaldi and Theodore Roosevelt), Michael Joseph Savage's "where Britain stands" and Titokowaru's "I shall not die" called nations to arms in time of peril. Franklin Roosevelt's "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" summoned resilience amid despair. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream", John Kennedy's "ask not what your country can do for you" and Julia Gillard's "journey of hope" here in February pitched to humans' all-too-rarely exhibited expansive nature. Churchill's "so much owed by so many to so few" and "the end of the beginning" encapsulated heroism and marked a turning point towards light. Norman Kirk's rejection of "an American policy announced in Wellington with a New Zealand accent"[5] echoed an emerging independence that would be cemented in a decade later. This sort of comment is not Ignatieff's lunatic literalism.

Rhetoric can be petty or wound with intent: Michael Cullen's "we won, you lost, eat that"[6]; Keith Holyoake's "Black Budget" typecasting of Labour for a decade after 1958; Robert Muldoon's "shiver looking for a spine to run up" belittling of Bill Rowling (who, in once trying "I have a dream", demonstrated the difference between vacuity and rhetoric); Phil Goff's "gone by lunchtime" torpedo into Don Brash (who thereby experienced the self-destructive power of Ignatieff's "one word out of place").

Rhetoric can boomerang. Ruth Richardson's "mother of all budgets" in 1991 got the imagery exactly wrong: it aped Saddam Hussein, who lost. Helen Clark's "haters and wreckers" fury at foreshore and seabed protesters in 2004 embedded hate of Labour in the Maori party at serious cost to her own party. Steve Maharey's triumphal "nine long years" jibe at the 1990-99 National government was used against his own party in 2008. Gerry Brownlee's far-seeing "blindingly obvious" comment in June about which areas of Christchurch could not be rebuilt turned out to mean "obviously blind" when he wouldn't or couldn't divulge the areas.

Rhetoric can work through humour. Lange was the best show in town, often with an edge: his "geriatric generals" putdown of critics of the anti-nuclear policy encapsulated a generational shift in national mentality and has become a shorthand for those fighting old battles in politics. Rhetoric can work off frustration: many politicians beset by bad polls have echoed Jim Bolger's "bugger the pollsters" on election night in 1993 when 8-10-point poll leads evaporated into a half-percent win on the night. Rhetoric can soothe: Keith Holyoake's "steady does it"[7] typecast the 1960s as comatose for a restless cohort of 20-somethings. Rhetoric can be mesmerisingly mystifying, as with many of Mike Moore's aphorisms: my favourite is the "footy jerseys on the line in Masterton". Jenny Shipley's "radical conservatism" on becoming Prime Minister defied definition.

Rhetoric can be grandiose and self-aggrandising. John Key's "I am the centre" may come to haunt or memorialise him -- "L'état, c'est moi" was brutally revised by the French populace (though it took a while). Adolf Hitler added speed to over-reach: his "*tausendjähriges Reich*", celebrated as "ein volk, ein reich, ein führer", ended in national suicide in 12 years. Regimes erected on Karl Marx's summons to worker unity enslaved whole populations, thus giving a wry twist to his manifesto's peroration: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains".

The 1000-year reich and workers uniting to cast off their chain take us to propaganda, which I think most modern rhetoric is. Gavin Ellis, a former journalist, teaches a course at Auckland university on this. (I had hoped Gavin might be here to contribute but is this week doing his viva for his PhD on a different topic.)

Politicians are habitual, even automatic, propagandists. They suggest action where there is inaction, or more action than is actually the case, or denigrate or misrepresent an opponent or

opponent's actions. Conservatives used Michael Ignatieff's long absences from Canada to suggest in campaign attack advertisements he was "a man just visiting"[8] (a label John Key, absent for a long period, has escaped). Fox News types have abused Barack Obama's name and skin colouring to blacken him as un-American by birth.

By now we are getting beyond the *Shorter Oxford*'s definition of rhetoric as words. In modern times rhetoric can take many forms and in what follows I have drawn on Associate Professor Claire Robinson's analysis of the role of social interaction in leadership and the proliferating, fractured communication channels digital technology has spawned. Of course, Dr Robinson is not responsible for any of my random ramblings.

Abraham Lincoln's spoken words were captured, preserved and disseminated in writing by the printing press. The words "art", "elegance" and "eloquence" used by Shorter Oxford Dictionary in its definitions of rhetoric apply. The *demos* was not the arbiter of statecraft.

That changed when the steam press made printing newspapers and pamphlets a lot cheaper and political argument reached and engaged a much wider readership -- including in pre-world-war-one Russia according to a *London Review of Books* which noted "an exponential growth in the publication of books, journals and newspapers [which were] political varied and often fervent ... a newly self-confident press", in which even peasants and workers could find a voice.[9]

Through radio the *demos* could in addition hear political actors: living-room patois overtook "art" and "elegance. Television added the speaker's face and body language. Keith Holyoake shouting back at protesters in a campaign speech in the St Asaph Street Hall in Christchurch in 1969 looked odd on a television set in the living room where the protesters could not be seen and barely be heard. Robert Muldoon by contrast at that time spoke straight into the lens, directly to the viewer, eyeball-to-eyeball. Television erased "eloquence"; projected into the lounge, eloquence was artificial and pompous.

Television made appearance matter.

Over the next 30 years politicians and the media played a cat-and-mouse game to set the agenda: politicians tried to talk direct to voters, unadulterated and unchallenged; the mass media tried to force politicians to respond to issues they and the public wanted addressed; the politicians then devised mechanisms to circumvent the media. Politicians wanted to "persuade or influence" or "persuade or impress". The media wanted to hold them to some sort of account (though what account is a matter for debate).

And images became more integrated into the message. Robert Muldoon's dancing Cossacks cartoon portrayed Roger Douglas and Co as communistic socialists for their work-based compulsory superannuation scheme in an election famous for promising "New Zealand the way you want it". Don Brash's iwi-Kiwi billboards employed personal abuse and denigration of Helen Clark as a campaign weapon. Watch to see whether Labour will this year use a montage of John Key's almost teenager-ish nya-nya carry-on at question time in Parliament. On a more positive note Norman Kirk's 1973 Waitangi Day hand-in-hand walk with a young Maori boy[10] imagined the cultural change to come as the Treaty was revived.

Music was added to the mix: I remember Labour's campaign opening in the Christchurch Town Hall in 1984 not for soaring words from David Lange but for the theme song: "*Up there where you belong*." The song promised liberation from Muldoon's bleak bunker. (The womb-like red of the room was also powerful imagery.)

Winston Churchill demonstrated rhetoric's multi-functionality. He didn't just use powerful words. He was to a beleaguered populace a the picture of defiance, determination and

reassurance in photographs and newsreels. Contrast David Lange's failure to attach power to his wit: after a time he didn't look the part of Prime Minister. Robert Muldoon's down-the-barrel stare created a one-on-one connection[11] which endured beyond his eviction from office: a large rally in Christchurch was told of many who had written: "We felt safe with you". Winston Peters' slippery words were far less material to his appeal than his winsome, urchin-like anti-establishmentarianism; no longer an urchin, he is no longer winsome. John Key connects effectively in all four of the social distances in Claire Robinson's analysis: face-to-face, one-on-one, in small (social) groups and speaking to large (public) groups; at all four levels he is likeable, one-of-us. The words he says are relevant, of course, but almost always unremarkable; it is the non-verbal communication which makes him a magnet for votes. Helen Clark practised lowering her voice to give what she said authority: that made her a formidable leader, mainly at the large-group level, making up for her awkwardness at public face-to-face or one-on-one.[12] Clark personified power, which John Key has yet to do.

But all of that is in the old media: halls and streets, newspapers, radio, television. A lot of political and quasi-political discourse now takes place in the new media -- that is, in the fast-changing unmediated democratic cacophony in which new channels seem to emerge every five years or so.

There are four main elements to this.

One is immediacy and proximity. You can be on-site because someone films it on an iPhone and relays it or tweets a few words. The oppression in Syria is an example: the rhetoric from the presidential palace in Damascus is contradicted by real images in the oppression zone.

A second element is speed. Information is transmitted in real time or very soon after. At John Key's post-cabinet press conference journalists tweet out the main points a few moments after he makes them. Photos and short clips follow fast. The rhetoric of one hour is old by the next hour. The Prime Minister's chief press secretary grumped last Saturday that if what John Key was going to say on Sunday was prefigured on Saturday the media would not give due attention to it on Sunday because it would be out of date. BBC World News anchor Nik Gowing told an Auckland business audience on 9 August that the timespan for a government or business to respond effectively to an event is now one day. Telecom found that on 17 Augus when its silly abstain-from-sex-to-support-the-All-Blacks campaign collapsed before it was aired after public ridicule.

A third element is the crowd: messages can reach large numbers very quickly. Thus a thought one New Zealander emailed to friends that compatriots in London might gather in the wake of the 4 September earthquake quickly reached the High Commissioner and within a day or two had metastasised into a service at Westminster Cathedral. The Arab uprisings bear testament to the organising power of twitter and mobile phones. The rhetoric in this case is not of some statesman but of the crowd, the *demos*.

A fourth element is democracy — or anarchy. Anyone can go public with words intended to "persuade or impress" and it might just get noticed. An example: the Bay of Plenty teenager with her bogus story which made her famous. In a different vein is the Chinese middle class's outrage at the high-speed train crash last month, at the contributing corruption and at the government's lame and off-hand response.

But wait, there's more. Not far away, some suggest, is the home holographic screen: intimacy with the famous for everyone; eloquence in the living room. The large group can be telescoped into a face-to-face encounter. Rhetoric will be words and image and personal feeling all merged. Or rhetoric will have been submerged in some undifferentiated melange. We will have strayed so far from the original meaning as to have made the word meaningless.

At the very least the proliferating plethora of channels and technologies greatly complicates the location and assessment of rhetoric. That is the value of Bryce Edwards' blog, trolling through the old media and the new media and drawing out of it some threads. In time, Dr Edward's project might be a mediating device for the blogosphere and twitter and whatever comes next in a year or five's time, giving us some idea of what counts or at least some idea of how to develop an idea of what counts. Of course, in due course the people will democratically sift out which ones count and which ones don't, as they did with the cacophony of newspapers the steam press unleashed. But for now we need more Bryce Edwards.

As for the politicians, generation X may be the transitional generation during this mediation of new media and it may be generation Y that gets to work out what rhetoric is and what rhetoric works in this new age. While I am waiting I will retreat back into policy. Goodbye.

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[1] As quoted by Smith, Michael Jordan, "Iggy Pops: the Michael Ignatieff experiment", *World Affairs*, July/August 2011

[2] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13271083, accessed 6 August 2011. An excerpt from the news item reads: "Mr Ignatieff said on Tuesday that Conservative attack ads, which made use of the more than 30 years Mr Ignatieff lived in Europe and the US, had a large impact on the outcome of the election. 'My attachment to the country, my patriotism were questioned, my motivations were questioned and that had a political effect, there's no doubt about that, but I have to also take my responsibilities,' Mr Ignatieff said. The Liberal Party dropped from 77 seats to 34 in the House of Commons, with Mr Ignatieff even losing his own seat in a suburb of the city of Toronto. The election marks the first time in Canadian history the Liberal Party did not finish either first or second."

[3] NZ Politics Daily, 30 March, on one of a series of days featuring articles and blogs bashing Phil Goff over Darren Hughes: "Of course there are in fact other things happening in the political arena at the moment outside of scandal politics. Below there are links to numerous stories covering National's public spending cuts and Christchurch earthquake reconstruction governance – hopefully these issues will also soon get some decent attention. But at the moment, while the Opposition party continues to bleed, this is unlikely." On that day I had written on the deeper drivers in public service organisation but that did not merit "decent attention" in Politics Daily.

[4] Rhetoric (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 5ed 2002) 1. The art of using language so as to persuade or influence others; the body of rules to be observed by a speaker or writer in order to achieve effective or eloquent expression. ... 2. Orig., elegance or eloquence of language. *Later*: language calculated to persuade or impress; (freq. *derog*. or *joc*.) artificial, insincere, or extravagant language ...

[5] Kirk, Norman, *Towards Nationhood* (New Zealand Books; Palmerston North, 1969), p51

[6] Actually, as recorded in Hansard (*New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* vol 586, p4570, 9 August 2000), he said: "Eat that. We won, you lost." But, as Paul Goldsmith (*We Won, You Lost, Eat That!,* David Ling, Auckland, 2008 p7) notes, "...in politics words frequently gain a life of their own. The phrase was inverted and made headlines."

[7] Gustafson, Barry, *Kiwi Keith: a biography of Keith Holyoake* (Auckland University Press; Auckland, 2007), p315.

[8] Smith, op cit.

[9] Hosking, Geoffrey, "Thrown Overboard from the Steamer of Modernity", *London Review of Books* Vol 33 No 15, 28 July 2011, p30, a review of Wayne Dowler *Russia in 1913* (Northern Illinois, 2010)

[10] Hayward, Margaret, *Diary of the Kirk Years* (Cape Catley and A H and A W Reed; Wellington, 1981), photograph opp p242.

[11] Robinson, Claire, "Friend or Foe: from social interaction to leadership judgment" (to be presented to the 9th annual American Political Science Association pre-conference on political communication, Seattle, 31 August 2011) draws on a range of studies to distinguish four "zones" of social interaction between leader and people: face-to-face (intimate), one-on-one (personal), small group (social) and large group (public) and details the way in which in each zone the leadership message is enacted non-

verbally, the channels through which it is transmitted, the degree of control or not the leader has over the self-presentation, the role of the observer, the leader's intent, what the audience looks for and how that translates into judgment of the leader(ship).

[12] Helen Clark in 1996 went through a remake of her image, with lipstick and a swept-up hairdo, just as Norman Kirk (weight loss, smart suits) and David Lange (stomach stapled) had before her.