

PERSPECTIVES

SPEECHES AND FOREIGN POLICY

DR MICHAEL FULLILOVE

MARCH 2006

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Speeches and foreign policy

Michael Fullilove

I emerged from the process of researching and editing my recent collection of great Australian speeches, *'Men and Women of Australia!'*, as an optimist. I know that the commonly accepted wisdom is that good public language is finished and the speech is dead. Sometimes it can be hard not to be sympathetic to that view. I was nearly convinced of it myself a few years ago when I heard a speech by President Bush, a politician who, on his day, can give a very fine speech. But it was on a different day when he looked out into an audience in New Hampshire and said: 'I know how hard it is to put food on your families.' That kind of thing can make you pessimistic.

But on the whole I am an optimist. In the course of my research I found remarkable speeches from contemporary times as well as our past – speeches that sing, speeches that engage the heart and the head. Not only older speeches, such as Vida Goldstein on the rights of women and Bob Menzies on Winston Churchill, but Paul Keating on Bob Menzies, Bob Hughes on the republic, John Howard on Gallipoli, Andrew Denton on Allan Border and many others.

There was an exception to this rule, though: speeches on foreign policy. In my opinion, foreign policy is Australia's area of speechmaking underperformance. I'll begin by explaining why speeches matter; then I'll look at the United States, where I think that international policy speeches are better but the pudding is sometimes over-egged; and finally I'll return to speeches and Australian foreign policy.

Why foreign speeches matter

I'm convinced that speeches matter. There is no better way to make your arguments and tell your story – no better way to convict a criminal, defend an innocent, prosecute a cause or toast your gran's birthday – than with a speech. There is rarely a better way to make an argument about the world, either. No meeting is complete these days, it seems, without a PowerPoint presentation. Well, a PowerPoint slide never changed anyone's life, except maybe for the worse. Speeches change people's lives.

What about foreign policy speeches? In the course of my research, Owen Harries gave me a copy of a minute he sent to Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock in the late 1970s entitled 'Preparing speeches on foreign policy', which contained some uncommon wisdom:

Speech-making is one of the most important activities in foreign policy. Much of foreign policy – particularly in the case of a country like Australia which has limited power to deploy – is declaratory rather than operational. On many issues we can not *do* anything except make our views known. This does not mean that such declarations are unimportant or should be treated lightly. Even when divorced from any commitment to act, speeches can have a very important effect on the attitudes of other states and on domestic opinion.

To some degree at least, a middle power rises or falls on the quality of its ideas, which are usually expressed in speeches.

Speeches and US foreign policy

Glancing at the sweep of US diplomatic history I would make two observations. The first is that the best American foreign policy writing is the best in the world. Let me give you a few examples. Franklin D. Roosevelt used his homely fireside chats to dramatise a distant war to an isolationist people, and gradually ratcheted up Americans' preparedness to enter the European conflict. John F. Kennedy's crisp classicism set the gold standard for foreign policy speeches. Recall the following lines from his Inaugural:

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility – I welcome it... And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

Ronald Reagan marshaled his phrases and sent them into battle against the Evil Empire, issuing this challenge in Berlin in 1987: 'Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall.' Or let me quote a humbler speaker, a presidential envoy rather than a president, Roosevelt's friend and confidant Harry Hopkins. FDR sent him to London in January 1941 to explain Lend-Lease aid and emphasize the president's commitment to the cause of the democracies. At a private dinner in Glasgow Hopkins was asked to speak. He reluctantly got to his feet and started talking:

Mr Chairman, I am not making speeches over here. I am reporting what I see to Mr Franklin Delano Roosevelt, my President, a great man, a very great man. But now that I am here and on my feet perhaps I might say in the language of the old book... (and here Hopkins paused and looked straight down the table at Winston Churchill) 'Whither thou goest we go; and where thou lodgest we lodge; thy people shall be our people; thy God, our God; even unto the end.'

My second observation is that a critical part of American foreign policy speechmaking is the emphasis on values. Successive presidents and secretaries of state have given values-laden speeches.

Melvyn Leffler at the University of Virginia has recently taken this observation further and argued that values are asserted most strongly in Washington at times of heightened threat perception. Leffler suggests that values talk helps to mobilise public support for policy, which then tempts governments to overreach beyond a careful calculation of interests. Certainly it is true that the pitch of values talk rises in times of crisis: think of Woodrow Wilson during the First World War; FDR in the lead-up to the Second; Kennedy during the crises over Berlin and Cuba; Reagan during Afghanistan. When threats are low, by contrast, rhetoric is more prosaic and engagement with interests more pronounced.

Other historians dispute this argument, or argue that values are a figleaf for interests, but Leffler's argument does help to explain the shift in President Bush's rhetoric in his first term. During the 2000 campaign, the Bush team's words were shorn of idealism. In her often-cited *Foreign Affairs* article, Condoleezza Rice provided a classic realist formulation: 'a Republican administration should refocus... on the national interest and the pursuit of key priorities.'

A year later, 9/11 shocked Washington and revolutionised threat perceptions and, with it, the Administration's rhetoric. Here are a couple of examples. In President Bush's West Point speech of June 2002 he said: 'Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place... There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.' (It's an irony that although Bush is known for his poor syntax and verbal mistakes, his prepared speeches are often beautifully written.)

Or his Second Inaugural: 'America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one... it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.' The president's fifth State of the Union address last January was like a 'greatest hits' CD, taking us straight back to the rhetoric of the Second Inaugural. This surprised many observers because the substance of US foreign policy has been so much more realist in the year since the Second Inaugural was delivered.

Let me make a couple of brief points about President Bush's foreign policy. In my opinion his values talk was actually fairly consistent with previous presidents. What *was* new, in the first three years of his first term, was the link he drew between values and coercion – between freedom and force – and his new emphasis on pre-emption, regime change and unilateralism. Since 2004, however, there has been a noticeable recalibration, back to a more moderate international policy. This development points to another danger of highfalutin speeches: not only can they lead to overreaching, but they can open up a gap between rhetoric and reality (as with the State of the Union's optimism about progress in Iraq) which is damaging to foreign policy credibility.

Australian foreign policy speeches

After all that, coming back down to the plane of Australian foreign policy speeches may seem like a relief. And in some ways it is, although one can have too much of anything, even moderation.

I began my research for '*Men and Women of Australia!*' by getting recommendations from people in the know about the best Australian speeches. I received fewer suggestions for foreign policy speeches than I expected, and fewer than I received for other areas of our national life. Those I did get did not exactly set my pulse racing.

I found older speeches like that of the MP and later Chief Justice of Victoria, George Higinbotham in favour of the annexation of New Guinea, or NSW MP William Arthur Holman against involvement in the Boer War. I dug into HV Evatt's archives looking for rich seams but I did not find them, not in his Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures at Harvard, for example, or his speeches at San Francisco or on Indonesian independence. Much better, I think, are Evatt's domestic speeches. In my book I include a classic tub-thumper – rousing and passionate – which the Doc gave to public meeting at Bondi Town Hall on the eve of the Communist Party referendum in September 1951. This was a common phenomenon, actually. I would read very thoughtful speeches from someone on our constitution or national identity or immigration, only to find that his or her foreign policy speeches were less impressive.

Menzies was always a class act, of course: an advocate by profession and temperament, with brilliant timing, a sharp wit and a striking presence on the rostrum. His simple speech taking Australia into the war against Germany was very nicely done, although many have queried the automaticity of the famous sentence: 'Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war.' Menzies' speeches on things he cared about – such as the British Commonwealth – were always impressive. Gough Whitlam's speeches on the link between foreign policy and nationalism were interesting, as was Bob Hawke's address to the US Congress in 1988. I was less impressed by the foreign policy speeches of Billy McMahon, Malcolm Fraser and others.

In general, I found Australian foreign policy speeches to be workmanlike rather than profound. They have content but not too much flair. I don't say they are inaccurate or that they fail to perform the function of relaying information as to the Australian Government's position on this or that. Rather I'm saying that they are disappointing because they so often lack big ideas, and because the mental process of converting a text from a cabinet submission or press release into a speech often seems not to have been undertaken. Sometimes the most important elements of a good speech are lacking, including structure, logic, colour, and style.

I'm not saying that every Australian foreign policy maker should imagine they're speaking at Gettysburg. I'm not saying their speeches should be drafted in reversible sentences or rhyming couplets. I'm not pleading for more ten dollar words, because they're not part of the Australian speaking style and would not go down well. Our speeches tend to be more direct than American or British ones, taut and laconic. We have a vernacular culture, so we generally don't like the big melodramatic set-piecer. I *am* arguing, however, for more attention to the crafting of the foreign policy argument.

Now let me give myself some cover, in the form of two caveats. First, I'm talking about speeches about Australia's international policy by policy makers. I don't include speeches by soldiers on the battlefield, which are occasionally magnificent but which are rarely about foreign policy. For example in my book I include a stunning speech by Frank Bethune, a young lieutenant commanding No. 1 Section, 3rd Machine Gun Co at Passchendaele on the Western Front in March 1918. Ordered to defend an exposed position, he issued the following Special Orders to the seven souls in his section:

1. This position will be held, and the section will remain here until relieved.
2. The enemy cannot be allowed to interfere with this programme.
3. If the section cannot remain here alive, it will remain here dead, but in any case it will remain here.
4. Should any man, through shell shock or other cause, attempt to surrender, he will remain here dead.
5. Should all guns be blown out, the section will use Mills grenades, and other novelties.
6. Finally, the position, as stated, will be held.

Although the section was isolated, it held the position for 18 days. Bethune's orders were later circulated to the Allied armies in France, and reproduced as posters in the Second World War under the caption: 'The spirit which won the last war.'

Furthermore I don't include remembrance speeches in my argument, as they are not really about policy either. I mentioned John Howard's well drafted speech at the Dawn Service at Gallipoli in 2000. Paul Keating's moving eulogy to the Unknown Australian Soldier in 1993 was probably the greatest short speech in Australian history.

Second, there are of course some exceptional Australian foreign policy speeches. They include Billy Hughes on his conscription heresy in 1916-1917, John Curtin's speeches in Sydney and London during the Second World War, and Sir Percy Spender's tightly-argued first parliamentary speech as Minister for External Affairs on 9 March 1950. Vietnam produced Arthur Calwell's masterful parliamentary statement of opposition to the war in 1965, which laid out Labor's principled position in plain English, argument upon argument. Calwell refused to shrink the US alliance to the dimensions of a single wrong-headed conflict, and he was vindicated by history. Menzies' brilliant reply to Calwell, which flattered the PM

more as a parliamentarian than a statesman, concluded: 'If I may end on a horribly political note, it is a good thing occasionally to be in a big majority.' Finally, the foreign policy speeches of Paul Keating and Gareth Evans were of a consistently high quality.

But overall I have to say I find the corpus of Australian foreign policy rhetoric a little disappointing.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer occasionally freelances in this area. He gave a famous Earle Page lecture last year which stirred up much controversy, in which he claimed that Labor had a 'Little Australia' mentality and was unwilling to play a leading role internationally, instead standing instead for appeasement and isolationism. I happen to think Mr Downer was wrong and there's a fair bit of bad history in his speech. If anything, Labor's foreign policy tradition leans more toward international independence and activism than its conservative counterpart. But I don't buy the main criticism of this speech, which is that this kind of values-based foreign policy argument is somehow illegitimate or dangerous.

If I'm correct, and Australian foreign policy speeches are often a little dull, why is this the case? There are at least four possible explanations.

First, some people put the view that foreign policy is too important for party politics. I believe the exact opposite: foreign policy is too important to be excluded from politics. The competing arguments on international policy no less than domestic policy ought to be exposed to discussion and debate so that we can test their strength.

The second explanation is that this is technical and difficult stuff, and flashiness can be fatal. In his memo to Peacock, Harries noted 'the problem of multiple and diverse audiences... content and language which may be appropriate to one audience may be highly offensive to another. As sovereign states, and matters of national prestige, honour and interests, are involved, this must be seriously considered.' But he goes on to acknowledge the danger of this argument: these factors, 'especially when professional diplomats are involved... can be seriously inhibiting and result in utterances which are so muted, careful and qualified as to be positively mealy-mouthed.'

Of course care has to be taken, shouting avoided, pronunciations checked and all the rest of it. That doesn't mean that foreign policy speeches need be boring. In the end, a speech is just a

speech. As a former official said to me, a speech is not a treaty, and delivering a speech should not be like negotiating a text.

A third explanation is that historically foreign policy has not had much domestic political force, so ministers and prime ministers don't try as hard with foreign policy speeches. Perhaps some politicians have so many domestic speeches to write and deliver – in the parliament, at campaign launches, in the electorate – that they don't worry too much about speeches that will not be heard by any actual Australian voters. If this was ever true – and I doubt it myself, because politicians always want to sound good, including to fancy overseas audiences – it is no longer true. After 9/11, the Bali bombings and the Iraq war, foreign policy is right at the centre of things. Even something as obscure as a single desk for the marketing of wheat sales is the stuff of debate in pubs and clubs as well as the ministry and the parliament.

A final possible explanation is that Australia's external circumstances have conditioned our foreign policy in the direction of pragmatism, which does not make for brilliant speeches. We are not a great power and we have less room to move than bigger countries. We cannot remake the world in our own image, even if we wanted to. Therefore Australian foreign policy takes on a bipartisan cast and a pragmatic tone. It's hard to draft soaring rhetoric about market access or alliance management or the other prosaic elements of our international policy.

This is the strongest argument of the lot, yet it's only partially true. There is still a role for agency in international affairs, even for smaller powers. History is full of examples of countries turning on a dime, as Ronald Reagan might have said, when governments change. Australian policy may have a strong pragmatic streak but it also has moments of idealism, whether it be Menzies' affection for Britain, Evatt's obsession with international machinery, Fraser's and Hawke's opposition to apartheid, Keating's efforts to contribute to nuclear disarmament, or, for that matter, the neoconservatism which is contained in Alexander Downer's Earle Page lecture. There is plenty of room for big ideas – and good writing. I for one would like to see more of both. We need to avoid the American trap of overreach, but that doesn't mean we have to underperform.

Let me make two final points in conclusion. First, I don't want to depress anyone about Australian speeches. I was blown over by the quality of speeches I found on my travels, from all sides of politics, from all sorts of people. These speeches are like time capsules, each one

holding a moment from our history. But I uncovered fewer time capsules relating to foreign policy than I had hoped.

Second, I'm not arguing that foreign policy speeches should be exactly like domestic speeches. We don't want to make the United Nations General Assembly into a bearpit like the NSW Parliament: some people from other countries may not appreciate Australians' robust approach to discussion. However we should demand more ideas and better writing from our foreign policy makers. We should tell them there's a constituency for it – and not only at the AIIA and the Lowy Institute.

If necessary, we should fight them in the bookshops on this issue. We should fight them in the libraries. We should never surrender.

This Perspective is adapted from a speech given by Dr Michael Fullilove to the NSW branch of the Australian Institute for International Affairs on 1 March 2006. He is the editor of *'Men and Women of Australia!' Our Greatest Modern Speeches* (Vintage, 2005).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Michael Fullilove directs the global issues program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy. Previously he worked as a lawyer, a volunteer in the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor, and an adviser to Prime Minister Paul Keating. He was a consultant to Frank Lowy AC on the establishment of the Lowy Institute.

Michael graduated in government and law from the Universities of Sydney and New South Wales, with dual university medals. He also studied as a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford, where he earned a master's degree in international relations and wrote his doctorate on Franklin D. Roosevelt's foreign policy. His dissertation was awarded the annual prize for the best international history thesis in Britain.

Michael publishes regularly in Australian and international newspapers and journals such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Age*, *Australian*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *Foreign Affairs*, and has provided commentary for broadcasters such as the ABC, SBS, Bloomberg, and CNN. His Lowy Institute publications include *Angels & Dragons: Asia, the UN, Reform and the Next Secretary-General*, and *Diaspora: The World-Wide Web of Australians* (with Dr Chloë Flutter). Michael's first book, *'Men and Women of Australia!' Our Greatest Modern Speeches*, was published by Vintage in November 2005.

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