

Foreword

Of the eleven Labour politicians featured in this book, I have had the privilege of hearing nine of them speak in person; the other two (Nye Bevan and Hugh Gaitskell) I have seen on film. Although they all represent different traditions within the Labour family, each of them had a capacity to make an argument, to move an audience, to win over hearts and minds, and to lift our spirits in a way that transcended a moment in time and space.

Bevan was famed for his ability to inspire those who heard him speak, and at the sixtieth anniversary service to mark the founding of his, and Labour's, greatest achievement – the NHS – Westminster Abbey filled with the sound of a scratchy recording of Bevan explaining how the NHS would work. It brought our celebration to life.

Gaitskell is best remembered for his great 'fight, fight and fight again to save the party we love' speech at the 1960 Labour Party conference. He showed great passion on that occasion and I remember the enormous sense of loss and sadness felt by my parents when news of his untimely death was reported just three years later.

I heard Harold Wilson speak a number of times, the first being in Bristol when I was still at school. I recall the excitement, the force of his reasoning, and the wit and ease with which he dealt with hecklers. Indeed, he relished their challenge such was his confidence.

Barbara Castle was always passionate and utterly determined. Her memorable speech to the 1999 Labour Party conference – a spellbinding ten minutes in which she excoriated the government for its treatment of pensioners – showed that she remained true to her principles until the end of her remarkable life.

Jim Callaghan's oratory was different in character. Not for him exuberance, but he was just as powerful in his own way. He had a reassuring presence and an authority – forged by his life experience – that commanded respect and won listeners over.

Michael Foot was a spellbinding orator. His voice – indeed his whole being – would swoop up and down as he railed against injustice, tore into hypocrisy and inspired many to follow him. He, and his successor as Labour leader, were the last of the era of thundering oratory.

In full flow, Neil Kinnock was a force of nature. Passionate, tremendously funny – his fund-raising turn at the Tribune Rally every year was not to be missed – and able to rouse a hall with power and conviction. His courageous 1985 conference speech denouncing Militant laid the foundation for Labour's 1997 election victory.

John Smith brought a sharp wit and great wisdom to his speeches. He commanded the chamber with his debating skill and his charm, and like Gaitskell before him, his untimely death was keenly felt as we mourned the great future that had been taken from us.

Tony Blair was a tremendous performer whether in the Commons or the television studio, and his conference speeches were masterly in their construction and delivery. He commanded the hall just as he commanded politics for a decade which saw him become the first Labour leader ever to win three consecutive general elections.

Gordon Brown was indeed a son of the manse, and two speeches stick in my memory. One was in a church in Brighton where his argument of the moral case for fighting global poverty inspired and visibly moved the large audience. The other was his address to Citizens UK a few days before the 2010 general election which electrified those listening.

I have left Tony Benn until last for obvious reasons. Apart from my late dear mother, my siblings and I probably heard my father speak more often than anyone else. I have seen him hold small rooms and vast halls in the palm of his hand, speaking with passion, eloquence and conviction. It's hard for me to sum him up, so I will quote someone else: 'One of the great orators of the post-war period'. Above all, he always encouraged those who heard him, as he always encouraged me.

Oratory is first and foremost about communicating, and in the age before amplification and television, it was the only way the human voice could reach an audience and put a case. Now, there are lots of different ways in which we can do so – the politicians in this book had a wide variety of styles – but I somehow doubt that in years to come someone will publish a work on 'Great Political Tweets'. This reminds us that – for all these changes – the power to move us is a rare gift, and nothing moves us more than a great speech. And for the Labour Party and our tradition, the ways in which we have helped to transform the lives of people have sprung from our beliefs, the way in which they have found expression in speeches, and the action these words have inspired.

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