

3 Oct 1980

Policy Unit

PRIME MINISTER

PREPARATION OF THE CONFERENCE SPEECH

A year ago, after the unbelievable shambles of the Conference speech-writing exercise at Blackpool, I noted its main lessons:

1. Preliminary discussions can involve 6 or 8 people without difficulty. Input from various sources is welcome on paper. But the final merging of all this material into a single draft must be done by two people: not more, not less. Just two people, one of whom must be the professional speechwriter (Ronnie in our case). Despite my high regard for Jock, I believe that it could be quite disastrous to bring him into the exercise in the last two or three days. By contrast, however, I believe that Angus' role as final editor is essential.
2. Despite all the blowing hot and cold during the speech-writing process, in the end, Ronnie's judgment of what will succeed both intellectually and emotionally - in other words, as theatre - has proved right and must prevail.. In talking about real speech-writing quality, you only have to compare what Ronnie writes for you with the terrible stuff most of the colleagues produce at Conference.
3. The speech cannot be cobbled together from the bottom up from a great file of bits and pieces collected over the previous year. It cannot incorporate every "nugget" which finds favour (eg pieces from Woodrow Wyatt, Paul Johnson, Frank Chapple, Hector Laing etc, etc). Some of these nuggets, like many of the bits from Jock and Alfred, will fit into the design. Others won't. The speech is only a bundle of match sticks. The addition or omission of a particular gem makes not the slightest difference, either to the impact of the speech or to the future of the country. It is the sum total that matters. The audience will never know the gems it missed, only those it heard.
4. All our speech-writing efforts seem to go through three stages. Stage one, and very necessary (though it didn't happen at Blackpool) is the attempt to produce a broad purpose, structure, message, and tone. Stage two is a digression - the preparation of more "economic substance". We then waste hours or days drafting what turns out to be an unbelievably boring economics lecture full of departmental statistics. In stage three, we scrap the economics lecture and go



back to the original plan. During this last stage, material which had been thrown in the wastepaper basket during stages one and two finds its way back into the text (for example, much of the best material in Blackpool in fact came from drafts prepared by Ronnie, Chris and Adam scrapped weeks before). We should try to do without stage two. (Too much detailed economics can also look like defensiveness - trying to make out that things are better than they are, by using statistics.)

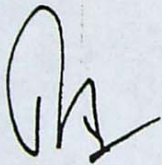
5. Detailed editing and redrafting in committee is a terrible waste of time. Much better simply to mark something which doesn't sound quite right and move on. Then the two speech-writers can work on those bits later. (We are starting to do this.) At Blackpool, so much time was spent in meetings that Ronnie and I hardly had the time left to do the redrafting.
6. The belated inclusion of a new section or even a paragraph into the text can take hours of work because it often means modifying the structure - like suddenly trying to introduce a new staircase or a second bathroom in a house that is half built.
7. We must be careful not to let the speech get bogged down in detail for the sake of nitpicking accuracy. It is first and foremost meant to be a rousing address, not an examination paper. I think it was Max Beerbohm who said: "The art of boredom is to tell all".
8. We tend, as Ronnie has often said, to throw the baby out with the bathwater - to jettison a good section because a word or a phrase jars. Often - and this happened a number of times at Blackpool - we compound the error by spending hours on detailed editing of early drafts, line by line and word by word, only later to rip out whole pages and throw them in the trash can. Final editing should be final.
9. It is essential that a new draft should first be read out loud and listened to, not read like a book. Otherwise you will not be able to form your first impressions as a speech.

Blackpool must have been the nadir of our speech-making competence! (Draw a veil over Swansea, which was a 72-hour emergency job.) There was no agreed purpose, structure or theme, just a knock-out



competition - against no discernible criteria - between rival drafts from umpteen different authors. Despite all these notes (transcribed almost verbatim from the notes I made at or immediately after Blackpool I think we have become more organised, first at Bournemouth and now with the work done so far on the Brighton speech. But I felt that we did so many things wrong at Blackpool that it really was worth writing them down and reminding ourselves of them so that we don't get into the same sort of muddle and waste a lot of your time and energy (not to mention Ronnie's reserves of creativity).

In fact, I think things are going reasonably for this stage of the game, and we should have an improved, though far from final or perfect draft for you tomorrow morning at Chequers.



JOHN HOSKYNS