

Where Arthur doesn't box clever

Arthur Scargill is widely regarded, even by some of his opponents, as a highly effective communicator. He has the great orator's skill of being able to speak fluently to large crowds, unaided by notes or new-fangled gadgets like the autocues so favoured by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. He knows how to put his points across in such a way that his audiences are never left in any doubt about when to applaud.

Yet the evidence from the past year is that Mr Scargill has not only remained an unpopular figure with the public at large, but has also had difficulties in winning the support of a substantial proportion of his own union's membership - which suggests that his persuasive skills may not be quite as powerful as they seem when he is rousing yet another audience to a standing ovation.

Like many masters of the traditional skills of oratory, Arthur Scargill is at his most effective when addressing a large crowd of supporters. But successful television communication involves the use of techniques which are different from the ones public speakers have been able to rely on for the past 2,000 years, and which cannot necessarily be transferred wholesale from auditorium to studio.

Because people tend to sit a comfortable conversational distance away from their television sets, some of the verbal and non-verbal techniques which are most effective for communicating with those on the back row of a large auditorium or outdoor meeting have a quite different impact when seen through a zoom lens. Carefully crafted phrases and elaborate gestures tend to come across on the small screen as unnecessarily exaggerated, overacted, or overdone.

Unlike Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, Arthur Scargill has so far shown little sign of adopting a less strident, conversational and televisually more appealing approach to public speaking. And until he does so, it is likely that those who know his speeches only from the excerpts they see on television will pay more attention to his abilities as a mob orator than to the actual contents of what he says.

Whereas the workings and impact of different oratorical techniques can be analysed fairly precisely by examining passages which prompt instant displays of audience approval (cheering, clapping, and so on), it is much more difficult to analyse how audiences respond to the way people perform in televised interviews.

For his interviews with the media, Arthur Scargill has learnt to adopt a much lower-key style of speaking than he uses when making a speech. His understanding of the constraints



associated with television communication is also evident in his ability to formulate statements which are both rhetorically very powerful, and at the same time brief enough to permit tapes to be edited without losing much of the gist of his message. For example, the following excerpt from a recent news bulletin is comprised entirely of contrastive and three-parted elements, which are two of the oldest and most effective of all rhetorical devices:

Don't listen to a Tory minister who practices hypocrisy - listen to your own trade union.

We're defending jobs, pits and communities.

The Coal Board and the Government's policy intends to butcher at least 70 pits and 70,000 jobs - our aim is to defend your jobs and your communities.

Although the construction and delivery may in this case have been technically impressive, the contents were a televisual liability. Coming as they did almost a year after the strike began, such statements have an awesomely familiar ring to them. That might not matter to an orator, who can get away with making the same old speech night after night to different audiences. But anyone who goes on television using the same words to make the same points in one interview after another is destined to become known as a bore. Television

saying more or less whatever he likes about anything other than the point raised by the question:

Q: Do you accept that x is the case?

A: I accept that (something unrelated to x)

Q: Is it now your objective to do x?

A: Is it now my objective to do (something unrelated to x)

It may well be, of course, that he is merely acting on the advice of media consultants who think this is an effective way to neutralize probing questions, while at the same time dictating how the valuable air time is to be used. But television audiences are perfectly capable of drawing their own conclusions.

Such damaging impressions are likely to be further enhanced by the way Mr Scargill tells interviewers off for being obstructive, biased, or uninformed, behaviour which is unlikely to be regarded favourably by those who feel that Peter Snow, Fred Emery, Brian Walden and the rest are merely asking questions that anyone might ask, and are therefore acting on behalf of the viewers.

Some people have suggested that Mr Scargill's behaviour on television is designed to appeal not to the public at large, but to his own members, presumably in the belief that what the mass audience regards as boringly repetitive, evasive and impolite will be seen by miners as consistently determined, skilful and tough.

But such a theory ignores the fact that, as competent conversationalists, many miners will no doubt interpret what they see and hear in much the same way as everyone else. It is also based on a cavalier disregard for the damaging impact such behaviour is likely to have on public opinion.

Max Atkinson

The author is a Research Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford.

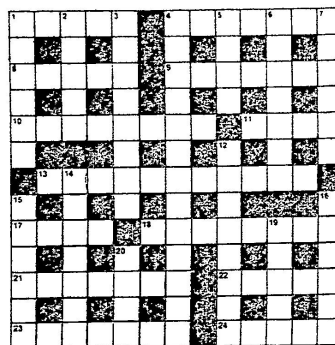
CONCISE CROSSWORD (No 585)

ACROSS

- 1 Hurry away (5)
- 4 Cough mixture (7)
- 8 Competitor (5)
- 9 Regret (7)
- 10 Portico (8)
- 11 Verifiable truth (4)
- 13 Dormant period (11)
- 17 Ground plans (4)
- 18 Leg neuralgia (8)
- 21 Rice stock dish (7)
- 22 Silly mistake (5)
- 23 Takes revenge for (7)
- 24 Third RC hour (5)

DOWN

- 1 Contend (6)
- 2 Wanderer (5)
- 3 Dodge work (8)
- 4 De Gaulle symbol (8,5)
- 5 Reputation (4)
- 6 Cyclone (7)
- 7 Perspiring (6)
- 12 Direct (8)
- 14 Stalcmate (7)



- 15 Tiber region (6)
- 16 Mahogany-like wood (6)

- 19 Deduce (5)
- 20 Male deer (4)

Where Arthur doesn't box clever.

Max Atkinson.

The Times (London, England), Monday, Mar 04, 1985; pg. 10; Issue 62077. (1026 words)

Category: News

© Times Newspapers Limited

Gale Document Number:CS168267876