

# Part Two: Political Power and Rhetorical Democracy

## CHAPTER 5

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF SAYING “NO NO NO”

#### THE POLITICAL DEMISE OF MRS THATCHER

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*ABSTRACT.* The author seeks to inquire into the notion of rhetoric which impelled Mrs Thatcher to report to the House of Commons on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> October 1990 with the devastating candour that she employed. He first sketches in the circumstances which gave rise to the iteration “no, no, no” and then asks: can this justly be interpreted as an “impulsive answer”? Was the Prime Minister merely indulging in some tic of temperamental obstinacy? It seems unlikely. The author instead suggest that there is an ancestry behind that epizeuxis, which he briefly identifies.

#### *Proem*

Given the nature of our inquiry in the present collective volume on Truth and Politics in Africa, it would not properly be within the scope of these proceedings to attempt to deal comprehensively with the theme of Mrs Thatcher’s<sup>2</sup> oratorical style – nor, indeed, to offer an analysis of any single speech (though in another setting the Bruges Speech (1988) would be a prime candidate for such examination). However, my first sentence will constitute sufficient indulgence in the scheme known as *paralipsis* or *occupatio*.<sup>3</sup> What I intend to do is to inquire into the notion of rhetoric which impelled Mrs Thatcher to report to the House of Commons on Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> October 1990 with the devastating candour that she employed. I shall first sketch in the circumstances which gave rise to the iteration “no, no, no” and

<sup>1</sup> Support by Institut francais d’Afrique du Sud and the French Embassy in Lusaka. is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs Thatcher was raised to the peerage as Lady Thatcher (of Kesteven) in 1992. Sir Geoffrey Howe was ennobled as Lord Howe of Aberavon. I observe these distinctions in the paper.

<sup>3</sup> As a figure of rhetoric, “paralipsis” is defined as: “Stating and drawing attention to something in the very act of pretending to pass it over. A kind of irony”; cf. G. Burton, *Silva rhetoricae/The forest of rhetorics*, at <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>. “Occupatio” is simply the Latin equivalent of “paralipsis”. (Eds.)

then ask: can this justly be interpreted (in the reductive language of Sir Geoffrey Howe) as an “impulsive answer”? Was the Prime Minister merely indulging in some tic of temperamental obstinacy?<sup>4</sup> It seems unlikely. I would suggest that there is an ancestry behind that *epizeuxis*.<sup>5</sup> In considering this matter I have been materially helped by reading Lady Thatcher’s book *Downing Street Years*; Lord Howe’s account *Conflict of Loyalty* has been almost equally illuminating.

30<sup>th</sup> October 1990

In 1956 there appeared a vividly-composed account, under the title *A Night to Remember*, of the last hours of R.M.S. *Titanic*. For many observers of British politics, and for anyone possessing a more than casual interest in the fortunes of the Conservative Party, November 1990 must rank as a month to remember. On 1<sup>st</sup> November Sir Geoffrey Howe, Lord President of the Council and *quondam* Foreign Secretary, resigned from the Government; on 13<sup>th</sup> November he delivered his resignation speech; on 28<sup>th</sup> November the Prime Minister tendered her resignation to Her Majesty the Queen.

The deterioration in the relationship between Howe and the Prime Minister has been chronicled by both parties from their own points of view.<sup>6</sup> No doubt many rubs and irritations intruded over the period of Howe’s tenure of the Foreign Secretaryship and in the single year during which he served, nominally, as Deputy to Mrs Thatcher. But if any single occurrence can be said to have precipitated the Howe resignation, fatally damaging to the Prime Minister, it was a public oratorical act of Mrs Thatcher’s – her iteration of the monosyllable “no”. Mrs Thatcher’s downfall was materially assisted by *epizeuxis*. During Prime Minister’s Questions on 30<sup>th</sup> October she declared:

M. Delors [the then President of the European Community (EC) Commission] wants the European Parliament to be the Community’s House of Representatives, the Commission to be its Executive, and the Council of Ministers to be its Senate. No, no, no.<sup>7</sup>

Lady Thatcher makes some observations on this occasion, which are of

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<sup>4</sup> Thatcher 1993: 863.

<sup>5</sup> As a figure of rhetoric, “epizeuxis” is defined as: “Repetition of words with no others between, for vehemence or emphasis”; cf. Burton, *ibid.* (Eds.)

<sup>6</sup> Lady Thatcher pays generous tribute to Howe’s achievements as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1979-1983) in her memoirs. Her first choice for the Foreign Secretaryship in 1983 was Cecil Parkinson; sadly, personal circumstances ruled this out.

<sup>7</sup> Thatcher 1993.

interest in the light of her oratorical practice. She had to stand up in the House and report on the Rome Council that had taken place on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> October. It was an occasion, the Prime Minister felt, for plain speaking. But this brought with it dangers to her personal position, given the fevered condition of her party. Nevertheless, Mrs Thatcher may have decided that, however perilous the situation, matters were not going to be amended by obfuscation. And indeed her memoirs deal with this very point.

The Prime Minister and colleagues had asserted frequently that “a single currency [was] not the policy of the Government”. But two qualifications were customarily attached. First, there was the possibility that the Government’s proposals for a parallel common currency could evolve towards a single currency. Second, Ministers had adopted the habit of maintaining that “We will not have a single currency imposed upon us”. Inevitably, there were differing interpretations of precisely what that delphic<sup>8</sup> expression meant. Such hypothetical qualifications could be used by someone like Geoffrey to keep open the possibility that we would at some point end up with a single currency. That was not our intention, and I felt there was a basic dishonesty in this interpretation. It was the removal of this camouflage which (...) probably provided the reason for Geoffrey’s resignation.<sup>9</sup>

The imagery used in that final sentence is thoroughly characteristic of the author. Indeed, the quest for definition constitutes something of a *Hauptthema* in *The Downing Street Years*.

### *The quest for definition*

Readers of Cicero’s *Topica* will recall his account of the 16 intrinsic topics of invention in IX-XXIII. A topic (from Greek *topikos*, the adjective associated with the noun *topos*, “place”; hence the Latin, *locus*) is

the region of an argument, and an argument [is] a course of reasoning which firmly establishes a matter about which there is some doubt.<sup>10</sup>

The intrinsic topics include definition, conjugates,<sup>11</sup> genus, species, similarity, difference, contraries, adjuncts. Definition is clearly one of the

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<sup>8</sup> “Delphic” refers to the usually ambiguous nature of oracular statements such as were delivered at Delphi, Ancient Greece; the ambiguity here lies either in the refusal of *imposition* (leaving open the possibility of *being persuaded to comply*); or in the conflation of national and European perspective: the United Kingdom was already enjoying, since time immemorial, a single currency, the pound sterling, when the statement in question was made. (Eds.)

<sup>9</sup> Thatcher 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Cicero, *Topica*, I.8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III.12. “Conjugate” is the term applied to arguments based on words of the same family. Words of the same family are those which are formed from one root but have different grammatical forms” (*sapiens, sapienter, sapientia*).

most potentially productive *loci*:

Sometimes a definition is applied to the whole subject which is under consideration; this definition unfolds what is wrapped up, as it were, in the subject which is being examined.<sup>12</sup>

One kind of definition applies to material objects, the other to abstractions. Definition allows us to maintain “a clear pattern and understanding” of these intangibles. In terms of its operation, definition works sometimes by enumeration (*partitio*) and sometimes by analysis (*divisio*), which involves the breaking-down of *genus* into species.

Beyond doubt, Mrs Thatcher devoted a great deal of her oratorical endeavours to the development of lines of argumentation evolving from this topic; in the context of EC matters, one could mention the Bruges Speech as a classical instance of an oration depending largely on the *locus* of definition. But the effort to extract—and build upon—definition is a persistent ingredient. Some of the most striking observations in her memoirs derive from what she identified as the reluctance of some of her EC counterparts to produce (or apparently to contemplate producing) definition of the cardinal terms of quotidian political discourse. There is a continuing strand of protest against the approach whereby

a combination of high-flown statements of principle and various procedural devices prevented substantive discussion of what was at stake until it was too late.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular concern was the capacity of treaties and communiqués to generate “nebulous phrases” which later were to re-appear endowed with a federal significance which at the time of promulgation was entirely disclaimed. Accordingly, at the Dublin Council of April 1990, Mrs Thatcher undertook the task of definition, subjecting the crucial phrase “political union” to analysis. But this was done in a manner which relied heavily on a *bravura* use of the trope of *ironia*:<sup>14</sup>

I said that the way to dispel fears was to make clear what we did not mean when we were talking about political union. We did not mean that there would be a loss of national identity. Nor did we mean giving up separate heads of state, either the monarchies to which six of us were devoted or the presidencies which the other six member states favoured. We did not intend to suppress national parliaments; the European Parliament must have no role at the expense of national parliaments. We did not intend to change countries’ electoral systems. We would not be altering the role of the Council of Ministers. Political union must not mean any greater centralization of powers in Europe at the expense of national governments and parliaments. There must be no weakening of the role of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, II.9.

<sup>13</sup> Thatcher 1993: 761.

<sup>14</sup> As a figure of rhetoric, “ironia” is defined as: “speaking in such a way as to imply the contrary of what one says, often for the purpose of derision, mockery, or jest”; cf. Burton, *ibid.* (Eds.)

Organization] and no attempt to turn foreign policy co-operation into a restriction of the rights of states to conduct their own foreign policy. (Thatcher 1993: 761-2.)

This represents an “unfolding” with a vengeance. For if political union were to be set in train, the consequences would be precisely those detailed, remorselessly, by the speaker. Lady Thatcher’s comment on her performance is that “to deliver a ten-minute speech with one’s tongue in one’s cheek is as much a physical as a rhetorical achievement”.<sup>15</sup>

### *The genus deliberativum*

At this point it would hardly be surprising if some of my auditors were to interject: “yes, this is all very well; but if oratory is in question, you are picturing not a successful but a patently unsuccessful orator”. For if it is true, as Cicero expresses it in *De Optimo Genere Oratorum*, that “the supreme orator... is the one whose speech instructs, delights and moves the minds of his audience”<sup>16</sup>, then the performances on the EC stage would testify not to supremacy but to extreme fallibility, since these occasions indicate a practitioner who was unconvincing as an instructor, ill-equipped to provide delight, and unable to move her auditors. But before endorsing such a verdict, we should perhaps reflect upon the nature and demands of the *genus deliberativum*. What is the substance treated in this branch of oratory? What are the responsibilities placed upon its exponents?

The deliberative speech is so-called because it is addressed to an audience sitting in deliberation upon a question. What is to be done? Do we follow course x or y? The “end” of the deliberative speech is advantage (*deliberandi finis utilitas*); of the judicial speech, justice; of the encomiastic speech which metes out excessive praise, the “end” is honour (*Topica*, XC1). The adolescent Cicero maintained that both advantage and honour were to be regarded as ends of deliberative speaking: so the orator is appealing to both *utilitas* and *honestas*, whereas the encomiastic speaker is appealing to *honestas* alone.<sup>17</sup> In a later passage from *De Inventione* Cicero writes “honour and advantage are the qualities of things to be sought, and baseness and disadvantage, of things to be avoided”.<sup>18</sup>

The pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* resolves the question by setting up *utilitas* as the end, and attributing to it the two aspects of

<sup>15</sup> Thatcher 1993: 762.

<sup>16</sup> *De Optimo genere Oratorum*.

<sup>17</sup> *De Inventione*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II. lii. 158.

security and honour.<sup>19</sup>

The bias in *De Inventione* is towards judicial rhetoric (*genus iudiciale*); so Cicero's thoughts on *genus deliberativum* are welcome. As always, his observations repay attention. For example, he notes (II.lvi) that

in the state there are some things that, so to speak, pertain to the body politic, such as fields, harbours, money, a fleet, sailors, soldiers and allies – the means by which states preserve their safety and liberty – and other things contribute something grander and less necessary, such as the great size and surpassing beauty of a city (...) and a multitude of friendships and alliances. These things not only make states safe and secure, but also important and powerful.

The cardinal terms are security (*incolumitas*) and power (*potentia*): Security is a reasoned and unbroken maintenance of safety. Power is the possession of resources sufficient for preserving oneself and weakening another.<sup>20</sup> *Ad Herennium* observes (II.3) that “to consider security is to provide some plan (...) for ensuring the avoidance of a present or imminent danger”. The deliberative speaker who addresses himself seriously to the task in hand is guided by three considerations – this at least is the *De Inventione* teaching grounded in the notion that *honestas* and *utilitas* are both ends to be served:

The greatest necessity is that of doing what is honourable; next to that is the necessity of security and third and last the necessity of convenience.<sup>21</sup>

So there is a descending scale: *honestas* – *incolumitas* – *commoditas* (the last term makes us think of Shakespeare's “commodity, the bias of the world”).<sup>22</sup> There is frequently a requirement to weigh the competing claims, for although *honestas* is superior to *incolumitas*, there will be occasions when the demands of the latter cannot be set aside.

Now, the textbooks all assume that two (or more) identifiable courses of action are being debated. Is it better to let Carthage stand or fall (*Kartago* [sic] *tollenda an relinquenda videatur?*) Should war or peace be pursued? But this is not the situation we encounter in these Thatcherite discussions; it would seem (if we adopt the testimony of Lady Thatcher in *Downing Street Years*) that “the question” was not put or indeed identified. Lady Thatcher protests at one point that there had been no “open, principled public debate (...) either nationally or in European fora” (Thatcher 1993: 767).

If we were to delve deeper in an effort to discover the roots of this strange non-dialogue we could perhaps suggest that both Mrs Thatcher and her interlocutors were working with differing interpretations of *necessity*. A

<sup>19</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III.ii.3.

<sup>20</sup> *De Inventione*, II.lvi.169.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, II.lvii.174.

<sup>22</sup> *King John*, II (Eds.)

passage from *De Inventione* (II. lvi-lvii) distinguishes between simple necessity (e.g. as expressed in the axiom “men must die”) and the necessity which is asserted under a qualification or condition:

When (...) we use the word necessary meaning thereby that an act is necessary if we wish to avoid or gain something, then we must consider to what extent that qualification is advantageous or honourable.

The connection between necessity/advantage/honour was clearly recognized, or assumed, by those EC heads of government; but the interpretation of the terms making up the nexus varied widely. It was not, perhaps, unreasonable for the British Prime Minister to seek to introduce greater rigour into the discussions and to urge that the ultimate destination should be identified before a timetable for arrival was constructed.

### Conclusion

It is my contention that Mrs Thatcher’s “No, no, no” is of a piece with her practice as a deliberative speaker. Sir Geoffrey Howe’s attempt at caricature testifies principally to mandarin outrage – to the dismay of the *haute politique* class on hearing an uncoded and “undiplomatic” utterance. But in fact, Mrs Thatcher’s *epizeuxis* was entirely in accord with Government policy as expressed in the Bruges Speech. It was, moreover, entirely in accord with her “Roman” approach to the *genus deliberativum* as an instrument for definition and delineation. In Mrs Thatcher’s view, it was essential – for the purpose of conducting any worthwhile deliberation – that the *causa* be plainly set forth. Her distaste for camouflage is apparent throughout *The Downing Street Years*. Perhaps the reproachful criticisms of Sir Geoffrey express the alarm of one who dreads the removal of the saving fig-leaf, revealing nudity.

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