

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWNING

Policy, rhetoric and public bewilderment

1. Is Plato winning the argument?

On July 16th 2009, the former Lieutenant-Governor of New York, Betsy McCaughey, used a talk radio show to lob a grenade into the American healthcare debate. Deep within one of the drafts of the Obamacare legislation which was then making its way through Congress, McCaughey claimed to have discovered a previously unnoticed but sinister proposal:

[...] one of the most shocking things I found in this bill, and there were many, [she said,] is on Page 425, where the Congress would make it mandatory [...] that every five years, people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner, how to decline nutrition, how to decline being hydrated, how to go into hospice care. [...] These are such sacred issues of life and death. Government should have nothing to do with this.ⁱ

There are two things to note about this claim. First it's untrue. The section of the bill which McCaughey was referring to—Section 1233—did *not* call for compulsory 'end-of-life' counseling sessions. Such sessions would have remained entirely at the patient's discretion. All it would have done was to cover them under Medicare, the Federal programme which pays many of older Americans' medical costs.

But the fact it was untrue—and indeed was promptly and definitively refuted—did nothing to stop it quickly gaining currency. In the days that followed, many of America's most influential conservative commentators—Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham—took up the claim. So too did a number of Republican politicians. There were Op-Ed pieces in conservative papers and, of course, innumerable tweets and blogs and Facebook postings.

The claim began to be rounded out. Laura Ingraham cited her 83-year-old father saying: 'I do not want any government bureaucrat telling him what kind of treatment he should consider to be a good citizen. That's frightening.'ⁱⁱ That last phrase, 'a good citizen', spells out the suspicion that what Section 1233 was *really* about was healthcare rationing.

Liberal commentators and politicians mounted a counter-barrage of their own, excoriating the 'myth' or 'hoax' of Section 1233. On MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, Joe Scarborough joked about the 'Grim Reaper' clauseⁱⁱⁱ. But on the other side, most of the discussion was predicated on the assumption that McCaughey's claim about the bill was *not* a myth but a simple statement of

fact. Then on August 7th, Sarah Palin entered the fray with a posting on Facebook which included the following words:

The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's "death panel" so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgement of their "level of productivity in society", whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil.^{iv}

What followed is well-known. Within a few days the freshly-baked term *death panel* became one of the best-known utterances in modern political history. It was everywhere—on radio, TV, the newspapers, the web, Twitter—spread not just by its authors and their supporters but by those who were frantically trying to debunk it. By the middle of August, an opinion-poll by Pew suggested that no fewer than 86% of Americans reported having heard the term^v. 30% believed it was a real proposal—the proportion among Republicans was 47%—while another 20% said they weren't sure whether it was true or false. Given the clutter of modern media, these numbers are astonishing.

Despite all denials, belief in the *death panels* remained stubbornly high and a few months later the Democrats dropped the underlying proposal. Earlier this year the Obama administration again raised the possibility of covering 'end of life' counseling under Medicare, but once again the *death panels* threatened to take flight and once again the proposal was quickly dropped. The issue is now politically decided for the foreseeable future.

A phrase which exaggerated and distorted a claim which was itself false and which anyway had virtually nothing to do with the central thrust of Obamacare, had changed both the course of politics and the law. It's probably the only thing that many Americans can recall about the whole healthcare debate. The veteran conservative firebrand Pat Buchanan put it this way: 'Of Sarah Palin, it may be said: The lady knows how to frame an issue.'^{vi}

I'll take a closer look at this intriguing morsel of public language, the *death panel* in a moment. But first let's step back and consider a broader question—namely the widespread view that something has gone awry with the character of our politics and the way in which political questions are debated in America, Britain and other western democracies.

Democracy is a rough business and disquiet about it is hardly new—read Thucydides or Burke. But arguably there's some real-world evidence to support present day anxiety:

- declining turn-out and increasing voter apathy in many countries;

- increased polarisation in both the US and UK around issues—health, education, foreign affairs—which used to attract fair levels of cross-party consensus and compromise;
- a sense of sclerosis in decision-making in the US and many other western political systems;
- polls suggesting that in many countries trust in politicians and what they say is *falling* and suspicion is *rising*;
- and finally, declining readership and audiences for many of the newspapers and news broadcasts which deal seriously with public policy issues.

But of course what lies behind these phenomena is itself fiercely debated, as is that question which in contemporary public debate is always the most pressing of all: who is to blame?

For some, it's the politicians—usually, it must be said, political opponents. On this view, there was a moment when some rascally or mentally unhinged crew got into power and started to undermine the integrity and reasonableness on which democracy depends. Clinton, Bush and Cheney, Blair and Campbell, Brown, Obama. The right, the left, the Tea Party, the liberal conspiracy. Excessive partisanship, extremism, spin.

There's a growing literature devoted to this theory. A special prize for the most depressing title of the year should go to Thomas F Mann and Norman J Ornstein's 2012 tome, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How The American Constitutional System Collided With The New Politics of Extremism*. That book essentially pins the entire blame on the modern Republican party—but of course, next to it on the bookshelf, you'll find a row of equally trenchantly argued volumes blaming the Democrats.

For others, the villains are the media. Commercialisation and competition, 24-hour news, talk radio, the internet, social media: perhaps it is structural changes in media that have replaced seriousness with triviality and sensationalism. Or perhaps it's individual institutions with their own dark agendas: The *Daily Mail*, the BBC, Fox News, *The New York Times*.

Fears that our media is letting democracy down—and specifically that it is failing properly to *explain* political choices to the citizenry—have been building for years. Nearly four decades ago, John Birt famously wrote in *The Times* of London that:

[t]here is a bias in television journalism. Not against any particular party or point of view – it is a bias against *understanding*.^{vii}

That claim, and others like it, have been repeated with ever greater urgency as technology has changed the grammar of journalism and the way it is consumed. Tony Blair's 2007 'Feral Beast' speech^{viii} argued that the resulting competition between media outlets has led to a savage hunt for what he

called 'impact journalism' in which responsible reporting is replaced by character assassination.

Finally, one sometimes hears politicians and others wondering privately whether the real culprits aren't the public themselves. Perhaps *they've* changed: become more trivial, more selfish, less civically-minded, less able to concentrate.

Now you'll have your own views about these explanations. I'm skeptical about any theory which relies on the premise that human nature has changed or which is predicated on the turpitude or madness of one political party or media organisation. Demonising your opponents seems to me more like a *symptom* of the problem than a *diagnosis*.

Nor do such theories explain why the same or similar trends are apparent in different countries and in different left-right combinations. As you will hear, I believe the structural and behavioural changes we're seeing in media *are* relevant but, unlike Tony Blair, I believe they're only one part of the story. And for me, what lies at the heart of that story is *language*.

Watching the global financial and economic crisis unfold over the past few years from the vantage-point of the BBC, I've been struck by how hard everyone—politicians, columnists, specialist journalists, academics—has found it to explain *what* is happening and *why* to those who have been most affected by the shock. Remedies are proposed which politicians duly promote or disparage. Monthly economic data is released. Across the media, there is a super-abundance of news, analysis, commentary and debate.

And yet, across the West there is a sense of a public which feels disengaged from all of this. The distress signals are manifold. In many democracies, the dismissal of incumbent leaders and parties, regardless of policies or political orientation. In some, the rise of extremism. In Southern Europe, national strikes and serious public disturbances and, in a few countries, a turn—only partial and within constitutional parameters, but a turn nonetheless—*away* from normal democratic political leadership and *towards* rule by technocrat.

Public incomprehension and distrust are measurable. One recent BBC survey found that only 16% of those questioned felt confident about defining the term 'inflation'^{ix}. For GDP the number was 10%; liquidity 7%; credit default swaps, CDOs, QE, TARP, the EFSF—not asked, but presumably off the scale. For most lay people, much of the theoretically 'public' discourse about the economic crisis might as well be in Sanskrit. Ipsos MORI have identified what they call a 'presumption of complexity'^x among a significant portion of the public, a sense *in advance* that certain public policy issues are so hard to understand that there's little point trying.

And even for those lay people who feel it's worth the effort, there is deep scepticism about whether what they hear about such issues can actually be

trusted. Even before the crisis, a 2005 MORI report suggested that 68% of the British public believe that official figures are changed to support whatever argument the government wants to make; 59% that the government uses figures dishonestly. At least in the UK, trust in much of the media is similarly low.

With figures like that, it's not surprising that both the politicians and the media find themselves in the dock. But this evening, I want to offer you a new suspect—which is our public language itself. I'm going to argue that the public language which most people actually *hear* and are *influenced by*, is changing in ways which make it *more* effective as an instrument of political persuasion but *less* effective as a medium of explanation and deliberation. Far from diminishing incomprehension and distrust, it often increases them.

So let's return now and consider the *death panels* purely as a piece of rhetoric. What makes it tick? Why was it so successful in shaping the debate? And what, if anything, does it tell us about what is happening to our public language?

Part of its strength is obviously its *compression*. A powerful political point that can be expressed in two words is perfect for the world of Twitter—and not just Twitter. Say that at some point in the summer of 2009, you'd been walking through an American airport past a TV monitor. The words *death panel* fit neatly onto the straps which Fox News and CNN and MSNBC put across the bottom of the screen. You don't even know whether the person on the screen is arguing in favour or against Obamacare or Sarah Palin or anything else. What you see—what you remember—is the two words.

We can break the compression down further. The phrase is *metonymic* in the particular sense that, in what it signifies, the part is clearly intended to represent the whole. *Death Panel* doesn't just stand for Section 1233, it stands for the whole of Obamacare. Actually it stands for everything to do with Barack Obama, his administration, his vision for America.

And it's *proleptic*: it takes an imagined future state and presents it as current reality. Whereas Betsy McCaughey simply misrepresents the draft bill, Sarah Palin is offering a political prediction which goes like this: the legislation the Democrats are proposing will give the Federal Government control over your and your family's health and—given limited funds—it follows that sooner or later they'll create a bureaucracy to decide who gets what.

On the face of it, this is a thin-end-of-the-wedge argument—let them pass this law and in the end the Feds will decide who lives and who dies. But of course it isn't really an argument at all. It's a piece of rhetorical panache which leaps at once to the dystopic end-state and brings it to life with vivid imagery. The power of the prolepsis means that you may not even notice that the intermediate steps in the argument are absent. The *vividness* is accentuated in the original posting by two inspired pieces of passing-off: Sarah Palin puts

the phrase *death panel* in inverted commas as if she's quoting from the draft bill; and she also puts quotation marks around "level of productivity in society", as if it was Barack Obama's term rather than her own invented one. In its evocation of a dehumanised bureaucratic state, *Level of productivity in society* is a miniature masterpiece in itself.

But the central two words *Death panel* trigger even darker allusions: 20th century eugenics and euthanasia programmes, or the selections in the death camps, with Barack Obama and Medicare officials taking the place of Nazi doctors. If we listen really carefully though, I think we can hear something else. Sarah Palin helps us with her crib: 'The America I know and love is not one in which my parents *or my baby with Down Syndrome* [my emphasis] will have to stand in front of President Obama's "death panel" [...]'.

The mention of Trig Palin, her Down Syndrome child, signals how far Palin has generalised and radicalised an argument which began with the relatively modest claim that the elderly were going to be badgered into refusing further treatment. Now it's about killing the young. But it does something else as well.

As an American voter, you might be forgiven for thinking there are two classes of public policy question. Those which go to the heart of religious, cultural and ethical differences—the debates about abortion and gay marriage are obvious examples—and those which are essentially managerial—what's the best way of securing the US's energy security? How can we prevent another shock like Lehmann Brothers? You might further conclude that the question of healthcare reform fell into the second category.

Sarah Palin says no. Her previous public mentions of Trig have been in connection to her opposition to *abortion*, and for her, Obamacare raises very similar issues—it's a battle between the forces of good and evil. Literally 'evil', she uses the word. In mentioning him here, she's attempting to pivot the visceral, Manichean quality of the abortion debate into the battle over healthcare reform. When it comes to abortion, the two sides believe there can be no compromise. Sarah Palin says that the same is true of healthcare. You can't compromise with people who mean to slaughter your children.

And that's the final point to make about the language of the *death panel*. It's *maximal*: in all respects it states its case in the strongest possible terms. What Sarah Palin claims to be uncovering is nothing less than a conspiracy to murder, with Barack Obama playing Catiline to her Cicero. And just as with the four *In Catilinam* speeches, there's no 'could' or 'might' about it. Presumption of good faith on the part of your opponent is long gone—this is a fight to the political death. It's a rhetoric which doesn't seek to dispel distrust about politicians, but to foment it.

But the difference between Sarah Louise Palin and Marcus Tullius Cicero is that *she* does it in a handful of words, essentially two words. And it worked.

Perhaps the *death panel* leaves you cold: perhaps you find it grotesque or comical, it's amazing to you that anyone could be taken in by something so crude and excessive. But all rhetoric is designed for a particular time and place and above all for a particular audience—it's a supremely tactical art—and the *death panel* wasn't intended for you. For the audience it was intended for, it was devastatingly effective, like a shaped explosive charge punching through an opponent's political armour-plating.

And yet in one respect it is an utter failure. It is so *tendentious*; so *abstracted* from the real—and difficult—decisions and trade-offs which must be faced up at the limits of *all* healthcare systems, including America's pre-existing one; it is so purely *partisan* in intent and meaning that it makes the real policy choices associated with Obamacare not easier, but harder to understand. Explanatory power has been wholly sacrificed in the interests of rhetorical impact.

The *death panel* is an extreme case of what I take to be a broader trend of public language, which is a growing avoidance, at least when the public at large are listening, of long-form and explicit argument about underlying issues in favour of a rich, but cryptic semaphore—often in the form of lapidary words, phrases and gestures, sometimes expressed at greater length—often composed of vivid examples or anecdotes which are presented to us as deeply revealing, and out of which a new kind of argument can be created—a hole-in-one argument with no need for further evidence or inquiry or debate.

It is the language of partisanship, character, intentionality, values and of solidarity with one's own side. It is sometimes—as the *death panel* is—the language of the conspiracy theory. It is never the language of explanation. The result is what I have called—shamelessly stealing and subverting the title of a work of mediaeval English mysticism—the *cloud of unknowing*.

In my *cloud of unknowing*, a political career can be scuppered by a single word: in the case of Andrew Mitchell, the improbable yet non-survivable word *pleb*, a word which—remember, we're in the cloud—he may never have said. In the cloud, that simple, artless phrase *I'm sorry* can have so much political strategy and media expectation pumped into it that for a day or so it floats above the political landscape like a giant dirigible—at least until a genius armed with Autotune launches the equivalent of a Stinger missile at it and suddenly Nick Clegg is singing on YouTube and we can savour the strangeness of the original speech-act in all its deconstructed glory.

Other words float in the cloud. Choice. Fairness. Opportunity. Freedom. Change. It's hard to think of many contemporary politicians who haven't found themselves using at least one of them.

These words sit beyond argument—who, after all, could be against any of them? They're usefully ambiguous in that different listeners can apply quite

different, perhaps even contradictory meanings to them depending on their perspective, but they *sound* crystal-clear. And each is typically used in isolation. There's no sense of tension or the potential need for trade-offs between them.

The cloud is full of concentrated phrases and anecdotes which seem to define a moment or decide an election or settle an argument. The people's princess. Jennifer's ear. Bigotgate. When it's a phrase, often it's mis-remembered—'there is no such thing as society'—in other words, it's not *actually* what the person said, but in the cloud knowing that a quote has been doctored or even made up doesn't matter. If it fits a preconception or pre-existing narrative, or is sufficiently and satisfyingly ironic, then the view seems to be that the person *should* have said it, or perhaps even in some deep Freudian sense *did* really say it, even if they didn't.

In the cloud, policy debates can be brief affairs. One politician signals that he wants to see the return of O-levels. Within seconds, a second warns that a generation of children will be consigned to the scrap-heap. Neither the *O-levels* or the *scrap-heap* are literal of course—everyone knows that the technocrats responsible for education policy will never be content simply to dust off exam papers from the 1970s. But even in the opening salvos of the debate, both sides want to position themselves with their own supporters and friendly commentators, and *O-levels* versus *scrap-heap* is a tried-and-tested code for doing just that. Like jaded grandmasters, the players know the moves before the game begins.

The more complex the policy area, the more important individual words and definitions can be. One of the BBC's minor successes, in the battle over its funding between 2004 and 2007, was to get the phrase 'top-slicing' accepted as the standard shorthand for the proposal to divide the licence-fee between the Corporation and other broadcasters. *Top-slicing* is about *cutting* not *sharing*, it sounds both brutal and arbitrary—things most people are instinctively against. Crisp and succinct, it ended up being used, not just by the BBC itself, but by most neutral observers and indeed by some of the proponents of the policy.

At least *top-slicing* dealt with the main topic under discussion. There's another case I want to examine which illustrates something else: a tendency to focus not on the—often impenetrable—central issues in a given policy debate, but on anything which can be turned symbolically or emotionally to good rhetorical and political effect.

The topic is healthcare again but now we're in Britain, where we will see many of the same pressures at work on public language, though not yet to the same degree as in the US. And this time the political polarity is reversed: Andrew Lansley's reforms were put forward by a Conservative-led coalition, the opposition led by the Labour party, health sector unions and some health policy academics and specialists. These opponents however would face many of the same rhetorical challenges as their American counterparts.

First, the policy area is so complex that it is almost impossible to explain, let alone to make political points about. I asked one of the leading experts in the field how long it would take an intelligent lay-person to understand the issues behind the 2012 Act and she replied: what sane person would even try? And the task would become harder as amendments stacked up—more than a thousand by the end.

Second, just as in the States, some of the critics would find themselves having to argue against ideas and positions which were alarmingly close to ones previously promoted by their own political side. The individual mandate, in some ways the centrepiece of Obamacare, began life as a Republican idea promoted by Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney. Over here, for years successive governments of left as well as right have accepted that the best way to improve the quality and allocation of resources within the NHS is to inject greater choice and competition into the commissioning of health services though, to respect sensitivity on the left about anything that smacked of marketization, the word competition was often replaced by the special term of art *contestability* when Labour was in power.

Betsy McCaughey and Sarah Palin had seized on Section 1233 because, even though it was peripheral to the Obama plan, it was easier to understand than the world of individual mandates and health insurance exchanges, but also because it could be made to speak to *intentionality*—and intentionality was a safer way of discriminating between the two political sides than the policies themselves.

In the same way, the opponents of Lansley-care knew that, while the finer points of GP-commissioning as a replacement for PCTs might provide hours of delight for MPs, peers and the charmed circle of health policy experts, it wasn't likely to catch fire with the public or sound that different from what had come before. So they too were on the look-out for aspects of the draft legislation which—even if they were at the margins—could be used to reveal what they took to be the Tories' *real* agenda.

That agenda in their view was privatisation pure and simple. So their goal—at once a rhetorical and a political goal—was to convince a significant proportion of the British public that privatisation was the true meaning of the Lansley bill.

I want to look at one of the tactical battles in this wider war. This revolved around not an argument, nor even a word, but a number. 49%. The trigger for this debate was Clause 163 in the emerging draft bill^{xi} which read:

[an] NHS Foundation Trust does not fulfill its principal purpose unless, in each financial year, its total income from the provision of goods and services for the purposes of the health service in England is greater than its total income from the provision of goods and services for any other purposes.

In other words, a Foundation Trust cannot make more money from non-NHS—presumably private—sources than it does from the NHS itself: commercial income in any given year cannot exceed 50%. In the shorthand of the debate, that quickly became 49% and it was this 49% limit on commercial income which, although never actually mentioned in the bill itself, suddenly spread like wildlife on Twitter and the web.

But what does the 49% actually *mean*? It's hard to believe that a raw percentage, that basic building-block of the technocrat's art, can have multiple meanings, but in reality numbers can carry a cargo of meaning every bit as rich as words.

To a Conservative, the 49% might indeed be seen as a long-term stake in the ground for the economic liberalisation of the health service—though, given that the bill maintained the universal right to NHS care, it was unclear where the new army of private patients to consume those 49% of health resources was going to come from any time so.

To a Lib Dem, the 49% was unintelligible in isolation from the system of checks and balances which they claimed they had won from their coalition partners. In reality, they claimed, Foundation Trust hospitals couldn't increase their private income above 5% without a vote from their governing body, not to mention scrutiny from the regulator. The 49% was just a backstop.

But to many of the opponents of the reforms, the 49% was of great significance. On the 8th of March this year, under the banner 'The Tories are disembowelling the welfare state—sheep-like, decent Lib Dems can only watch', Polly Toynbee wrote:

On Thursday Shirley Williams led her erstwhile rebels into the government lobby to vote for hospitals' right to use 49% of beds for private patients.^{xii}

Polly Toynbee has simplified Clause 163 into a new 'right' which hospitals are being granted and she's reified the 49% and brought it to life by making it 49% *of hospital beds*. Many of the Tweets which followed this column assumed that the privatisation of half of the NHS's facilities would happen as soon as it became law.

A few days later, Polly used different language, suggesting that the government was 'fencing off 49% of NHS facilities to private practice' in a way that 'risks denying NHS patients their scans, services and beds.'^{xiii} Now the 49% has become a floor, not a ceiling—or better, a curtain which will be drawn around half the beds so that ordinary NHS patients cannot use them. We see again the *concentration* of the claim, the collapsing of a possible future into a certain present. And of course there can be no doubt about the intentions of the people who are closing the curtain: whatever they say, they are privatisers.

But meanwhile Shirley Williams was stoutly defending her efforts to, in her words, ‘make a bad bill better’. She quoted Polly Toynbee’s first article to delegates at the Liberal Democrats’ spring conference and went on to say:

The so-called 49% is a myth or, to put it in non-parliamentary language, a lie. Either [Polly] just did not look at the detail and therefore is able to say that in the *Guardian*, or she did look at the detail and decided that tribalism should trump truth.^{xiv}

And she went to offer this ringing denunciation, not just of her critics, but of the new forms of media that had apparently helped them: ‘We are fighting an uphill battle for the truth, to be able to base people’s opinions on facts, and not on the stuff they have presented on Twitter and tweet and, dare I say it, the new social network, which is known as twist.’^{xv}

So what *is* the truth about the 49%? People often appeal for someone—the UK Statistical Authority, the BBC, one of those self-appointed political fact-checking organisations, *someone*—to adjudicate definitively on arguments like this. But, although it sounds as if it should be factually determinable, the meaning of the 49% is actually a matter of political opinion.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”^{xvi}

And to state the obvious, hearing a revered politician and distinguished journalist, both of whom are known for the seriousness of their thinking on social policy over decades, trade one-liners over the meaning of a number which doesn’t even appear in the legislation is hardly likely to help the public understand the *actual* provisions and practical policy questions raised by the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

The bill was eventually passed in substantially amended form. But in some respects, the bill’s opponents could be said to have won the rhetorical battle. MORI found consistently low levels of public understanding of what was proposed—at no point did those claiming to understand the bill rise above 30%—but when asked what the reforms involved, by far the most common answer was ‘privatisation’ and that figure grew over the period.^{xvii} That was always the word Andrew Lansley’s opponents were trying to land.

We should note something else. Shirley Williams mounts a spirited defence of the Lib Dem position with some sharp catch-phrases of her own, that *tribalism trumping truth* line and her joke about the social network *Twist*. But a rhetorical asymmetry has opened up: it is becoming harder to argue in favour of compromise than against it. In my time as a journalist and editor,

I've seen the noun *compromise* itself become a pejorative and the adjective *uncompromising* a compliment. To change one's mind is to execute a U-turn or, in the States, to flip-flop. To meet a political opponent half way is treason. Anything less than utter certainty can sound—and I mean literally *sound*—weak or false or both.

So 'making a bad bill better', though of course redolent of the give and take on which all democratic government is based, is now a risky thing to admit to in public. Surely the right thing to do with a bad bill is not to amend it, but to abolish it? In the case of Andrew Lansley's health reforms, this is exactly what the Labour Party is now committed to—which probably means that the NHS can look forward to further waves of reform as far as the eye can see.

Earlier this year, when one of Mitt Romney's advisors suggested that perhaps he should only repeal the bad parts of Obamacare, the right reacted with savagery. Here's the conservative blogger Erick Erickson:

If a Republican gets into the White House and does not sweat blood trying to repeal Obamacare in its entirety (regardless of success), I predict the end of the Republican party legitimately. [...] If the GOP takes back the White House, its voters will expect a real fight, not a half-hearted attempt.^{xviii}

The most interesting words there are in the parenthesis—*regardless of success*. Solidarity with one's own supporters and ideology is more important than improving a given piece of legislation. It is better to fail purely than only partly to succeed. Ranged against the language of compromise, the language of radical solidarity is simpler and more powerful.

So today the *death panel* and the 49% float together in the *cloud of unknowing*, the cloud which purports to make difficult issues easy to understand but which raises more questions than it answers.

It's a cloud of images as well as words. Sometimes a group will choose a visual rather than a verbal rhetoric to convey a particular message: flag-burning or shoe-throwing or, more innovatively, the tiny tents of the Occupy movement under the tall, impersonal towers of Wall Street and the City of London.

One way of thinking about 9/11 is as mass-murder conducted to create a single piece of rhetoric: in this case, a few seconds of television footage of aeroplanes hitting skyscrapers and the skyscrapers subsequently collapsing. The twin towers stand for western might and western values, their collapse the possibility that that might and those values can be laid low. The flame and smoke, the falling walls, bring that hoped-for future destruction into the present. Metonymy, prolepsis.

Let me sharpen up my claim. It is *not* that traditional rhetoric has disappeared. On the contrary, some of the greatest orators who have ever spoken—Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton among them—are alive today. Nor is it that traditional political debate is dead. The work of government goes on, laws are passed and there are still moments when what happens on the floor of the Commons, or the Senate, or the many other assemblies across the west matters most—though such occasions are rarer than they were.

Nor is it that the information on which someone might base a reasoned understanding of a given issue is less available. Far from it, there is probably more of it today than at any previous point in history.

Nor am I claiming that highly synoptic language or ringing and memorable phrases are something new. Let them eat cake. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

No, my claim is that—for a series of reasons which are *not* principally the fault of any one political persuasion, nor of our political class, nor of our media—we are seeing a growing concentration of public language into would-be knock-out blows, rich in allusion but abstracted from issues they purport to illuminate; and that the public discourse which the public themselves are most likely to hear is undergoing a change which, though not necessarily a change in kind, is potentially dangerous.

The word *rhetoric* has two broad senses in English. One is negative, as in the phrase ‘empty rhetoric’. Under this meaning, rhetoric is *sweet talk*, a dubious art which allows a shyster to dress up their argument with eloquent words and make it sound stronger than it is. This suspicion of rhetoric is particularly salient in the English-speaking world but it has ancient precedents.

But so far this evening, I’ve been discussing rhetoric in its more neutral sense, meaning the art of public language—in other words the language of politics, public policy, the law courts and so on, the language in which issues which matter collectively to a society are deliberated and decided.

Rhetoric is a fact of life in all societies, but the more open the society the more central rhetoric becomes. It’s impossible to imagine a democracy without debate and discussion and competition in acquiring and mastering the skill of public persuasion. Perhaps you prefer to imagine rhetoric as a superficial layer in politics beneath which lies a pristine base of pure policy. The reality is that in democracies, the substance and articulation of policy are always tangled up—and to claim otherwise is itself to make a classic move in the rhetorical game.

And at least in principle, rhetoric performs a vital role in an open society—which is to provide a bridge between the professionals, the political leaders and civil servants, and the public at large. It is through an effective public language that average citizens can both understand and contribute to

public questions. It is for this reason that, in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, rhetoric was regarded as a higher art-form than poetry—something more or less incomprehensible to us today.

So let's start at the top and listen for a moment to the statesman Pericles as the historian Thucydides imagines him describing the particular virtues of Athenian democratic culture:

Our people are interested in the private and public alike and, even among ordinary working people, you'll find no lack of insight into matters of public policy. [...] Unlike others, we Athenians decide public decisions collectively for ourselves, or at least try to arrive at a clear understanding of them. We don't believe that debate gets in the way of action—it's when you act without proper debate that you get bogged down.^{xix}

It is rhetoric, the language of explanation and deliberation as well as of persuasion, that enables this collective decision-making to happen. Pericles himself, Thucydides tells us, was the most influential man of his time in words as well as deeds^{xx}. Professor Thomas Habinek, who refers to that moment in Pericles's funeral oration in his guide to ancient rhetoric^{xxi}, also reminds us that for the Romans at the core of the concept of *libertas* is the ability of favoured citizens to take part in matters of state. Someone who is unwilling or unable to engage in this way is a layman in a radical sense of that word, an incomplete human being. It was the same in Athens: immediately after the passage I've just quoted, Thucydides has Pericles describe such a person as *αχρηιος*—useless. But again the ability to engage depends on mastery of public language.

Today, we tend to think of freedom of speech as freedom of personal expression and, when a society suppresses it, we regard that as a consequence of the broader politics. But for at least some in the ancient world the causality runs the other way: it's *when public language fails* and collective deliberation is no longer possible that democratic and republican institutions collapse and oppression ensues.

In Book III of his *History*, Thucydides adduces a change in language as a factor into Athens' descent into demagoguery and political failure: people began to define things in any way they pleased, he says, and the 'normally accepted meaning of words' broke down^{xxii}. And here, from Sallust's account of the Catiline crisis in republican Rome, is a warning from Cato the Younger: 'we have long since lost the true names for things'^{xxiii}. I'm indebted to Professor Matthew Leigh of this university for both these examples.

But there were others in the ancient world who were sceptical about rhetoric even in principle. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates tells Gorgias that rhetoric is not an art at all but a knack. Whereas philosophy aims at the truth, rhetoric is a form of flattery, a fake or imaginary version of politics^{xxiv}. And for Plato this antipathy to rhetoric is bound up with a wider scepticism about democracy. In

The Republic, Plato warns that democracies inevitably degenerate via mob rule to tyranny^{xxv}. Instead, famously, he argues for rule by philosopher-kings, in other words government by a technocratic elite who will not have to persuade the general population of anything but can manage the state with objective skill and knowledge.

On the face of it, the immense success of modern western democracy in driving economic growth, social advancement and human flourishing suggests that Plato's misgivings are misplaced. Our democracies differ in one important respect from that of Athens: they are *representative*. The people delegate power to elected officials and do not have to be as conversant with day-to-day issues as voters in Athens did—though, even in a representative democracy, public ignorance of and disengagement from public policy cannot be healthy.

And there are other pressures playing on the representative model. Plebiscites and referenda are becoming more common in many democracies. So too—driven by the kind of political rhetoric we saw in the US healthcare debate—are pledges and contracts in which those standing for election declare that, come what may, they will vote in accordance with a prior commitment given to electors. These pledges are a specialised rhetorical gesture in themselves and the penalty for breaching them is growing—as Nick Clegg and his colleagues discovered in relation to university tuition fees.

Arguably the pledges speak of a distrust not just in a given set of politicians but in the idea of representative democracy itself. Add this distrust to the broader distrust of politics I discussed earlier, and voter apathy, and perhaps we cannot dismiss Plato's attack on democracy quite as easily as we could have done a generation or two ago.

So let me sketch out a hypothesis about how we've got to where we are now. And you'll see that I don't place language at the end of the story but in the middle of it, as a *cause* as well as a *consequence* of change.

Background and context first. In the deep background are three centuries in which Enlightenment critical rationalism and scepticism—and the reaction to them—have left us with a pervasive climate of suspicion composed of two opposing camps: a suspicion of all traditional forms of purported authority—church, state, class and so on—and, in reaction, a contrary suspicion of everything which it is proposed should take their place. The contours of this crisis were thoroughly explored in the 19th century by thinkers including Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but it is still running its course and it's left us with a presumption that no policy proposal, no public statement, should be taken at face value but rather should be interrogated so that we can understand what its *real* meaning and the *real* intentionality behind it are. Whether this scepticism is healthy or not is itself of course the subject of debate.

Next come the decades of relative peace and prosperity across most of the west; decades in which great advances have been made on many first-order social and other policy issues.

No doubt, further advances are possible but they entail trade-offs which are more finely balanced than the ones that came before. It was easier to decide that London needed an airport in the first place than it is now to decide whether that airport should acquire an additional runway. The second decision may be much less momentous than the first, but it doesn't *feel* that way and everything about it—the length of time it takes, the evidence you need, the opposing passions—is more complex and troublesome.

Add to this evidence-based policy-making—in other words the belief, shared by all mainstream parties in this country and most others, that the process of policy formulation should be grounded in the most thorough gathering and analysis of evidence. It means that anyone who truly wants to engage with a given area of policy must master vast quantities of data and argument. The gap between the *illuminati*, the technocrats who devote themselves full-time to the task, and Pericles' 'ordinary working people', has grown wider and the challenge of bridging it through communication and explanation harder.

Evidence-based policy-making has contributed to another contextual factor which is that, on many issues, political differentiation is also more difficult. Relative prosperity and the collapse of communism mean that traditional differentiation based on class or pure ideology are becoming harder to sustain except at the extremes. The ascendancy of political managerialism, the judgement of the success of governments increasingly against a set of objective metrics—GDP growth, unemployment, inflation and so on—combined with the fact that a new minister from whatever political background is likely to be confronted by his or her civil servants with the *same* analysis and the *same* basic policy prescription as their predecessor, make it more difficult for politicians to look and sound different from their rivals.

But meanwhile our understanding of language itself has been changing and deepening both through academic research and the needs of marketeers and advertisers. The particular challenge of how to differentiate your brand and your product when technology, utility and public taste are all forcing it closer to those of your competitors—how to convince potential buyers that a given BMW *really is* quite different from the seemingly near-identical Mercedes or Audi—is a classic marketing conundrum which can be addressed not just by intuition and imagination but by the exhaustive testing of candidate ideas, words and phrases with consumers. Often the solution is a combination of words and images which imply something about *values* and *character*—in the case of BMW, by summoning up a brand essence which is somehow sportier, more rakish and characterful, perhaps a little younger than its rivals.

It was inevitable that similar empirical techniques would be applied, with growing specificity and precision, to political utterances—and nor is that necessarily dishonourable or sinister. Philip Gould believed passionately in

the cause of New Labour and to him it was obvious that he should do everything he could to help New Labour express its ideas as effectively as possible. That was the end which all the research and all the focus-groups served.

Of all contemporary practitioners in this field though, perhaps the one who has concentrated most closely on how to engineer the most political potent language down to individual words and phrases is that alumnus of Trinity College, the American Frank Luntz. The author of the self-explanatory *Words That Work* and numerous other books aimed at politicians and business leaders alike, Frank's contention is that successful public language need not be left up to chance or individual instinct but can be arrived at by exhaustive and recursive testing with audiences. Here he is, writing in *The Huffington Post* in January 2011:

Words matter. The most powerful words have helped launch social movements and cultural revolutions. The most effective words have instigated great change in public policy. The right words at the right time can literally change history.^{xxvi}

Frank Luntz goes on to offer his readers what he says on the basis of his research are the eleven key words and phrases that politicians and other leaders should use in 2011. Most are disarmingly simple. *Imagine* remains a very powerful word, apparently—so too, unsurprisingly, is *integrity*, especially in the phrase *uncompromising integrity*—note again how problematic that word *compromise* has become. He also strongly recommends the phrase *I get it*:

This explains not only a complete understanding of the situation [he says], but a willingness to solve or resolve [it]. It's short, sweet and effective – and too few leaders use it.^{xxvii}

And Frank recommends its use not through instinct but because he has seen and measured audiences reacting to its use again and again. Rhetoric, which was once the queen of the arts and accessible at its highest level only to those of genius—a Demosthenes or a Cicero, a Lincoln or a Churchill—is acquiring some of the attributes of an empirical science. At its cutting-edge, it intersects with behavioural economics and so-called 'nudge', the theory that there are certain cues and triggers—often indirect or even subliminal—that can influence human attitudes, decisions and actions.

All of these approaches rely on the testing and recommendation of specific cues, most of them linguistic cues. The inevitable consequence is a systematic concentration on the research and use, not of long passages or even of whole sentences, but of individual words and phrases.

Until recently, the only way of analysing a piece of language in this way was through qualitative and quantitative market research. But no one focus-grouped the phrase *death panel* and no one needed to. The internet and platforms like Twitter and Facebook have made the public at large into a vast, cost-free focus group. A politician like Sarah Palin can put out literally dozens of sentences and phrases a day. Every so often, a phrase will pop up which is so eye-catching or thought-provoking or funny that within minutes it is being re-posted and re-tweeted across an ever-widening pool of people.

And there's a further twist. Newspapers and conventional broadcasters, fearful of being left out of this new kind of opinion-forming, watch these platforms—especially Twitter—like hawks and at a certain point, a tweet or posting can cross over and be further amplified by a traditional media which is itself now an on-all-the-time hyper-reactive environment.

There is a kind of Darwinian natural selection of words and phrases going on and, by definition, the only kind of language that emerges from this process is language that works. And it works characteristically for the same reason that Frank Luntz thinks that the phrase *I get it* works or the *death panel* or the 49% or even, horrifically, the aircraft crashing into the side of the World Trade Center: because it's short and simple. You hear it, you get it, you pass it on.

A deep background of social and cultural suspicion. Policy which is more complex and more finely-balanced than ever before. Politicians struggling with the challenge of differentiation. Around a century of empirically-based advances in the understanding and construction of public language. Digital technology and its impact on the way new and old media alike both report and influence that language.

It is not wicked politicians, or a perverted media, or a disengaged public, but these five factors taken together which provide what I believe is the most compelling explanation of the changes in public language which I've explored this evening—with all their attendant consequences for our wider political culture.

Earlier on, I pointed to a weakening of the language of compromise. I think that there's a second telling asymmetry, which is that it is becoming easier to argue *against* proposed reform than in favour of it. It is not that reform is impossible: as I've noted this evening, we've seen governments both here and in America passing controversial healthcare reform despite concerted opposition. But the greater power of critical, deconstructive rhetoric and its ability to sow the seeds of doubt, not just about the reforming policies themselves, but about the motives of those who are promoting them, means that the political cost of such reforms can be high.

So reform—in whatever direction—is getting harder. And some politicians are beginning to believe that the bigger the attempt to communicate and explain a given set of proposed reforms, the more likely they are to get bogged down in

polarised party-political argument. Earlier this year in the *New Yorker*, Ezra Klein quoted Jim Cooper, a Democratic Congressman giving this rather bleak assessment about how counter-productive it can now be to attempt to argue out loud for the reforms you want to enact:

The more high profile the communications effort the less likely it is to succeed [he said]. In education reform, I think Obama has done brilliantly, largely because it's out of the press. But on higher profile things, like deficit reduction, he's had a much tougher time.^{xxviii}

This doesn't mean that reform is impossible, but it does mean that governments have to pick their fights carefully. It also means that there are real limits on what can be proposed in the way of reform without intolerable political cost. Despite the heat and noise, what is striking about the debates in this country about the NHS and public spending and taxation is how *narrow* the immediate policy gap between the parties often is. Whether you believe in significantly higher or lower taxes or higher or lower public expenditure, if you come to power you will find that the political friction involved in making the case beyond the first few percentage-points rises up a frightening parabola.

In placid times, this may provide stability, but supposing we encounter a situation when drastic action is called for? What if, for example, the worst scenarios about climate change were shown to be valid and immediate and radical steps had to be agreed and taken? Do we still have a public language capable of supporting such decisions?

Europe's economic crisis is not as serious as that, but it still means bitterly painful policy decisions in many countries. So far Europe's democracies have survived intact, though the fault-lines are more visible by the month—and those fault-lines are directly related to the issues I have discussed this evening: public confusion, public suspicion, the ascendancy of political rhetoric over policy explanation.

Let me close by answering my own question: is Plato winning the argument? No, not yet. Democracy, and the engagement, not just of rulers and technocrats, but of the people at large in the decisions that determine their future, remains one of the prime reasons for the extraordinary success of the West and it is far from eclipse, let alone destruction.

But if I am even only partly right in suggesting our public language is entering a decadent phase—less able to explain, less able to engage except in the purely political, more prone to exaggeration and paranoia—then the risk is that a public language and a set of institutions which were once a source of competitive advantage, as well as a guarantee of freedom, may falter.

Although the factors that have led to the changes I have described cannot be wished away, that doesn't absolve us of the responsibility to attempt, in Eliot's words, to 'purify the dialect of the tribe'^{xxix}. How we might begin to do that, I will return to later in the week.

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- ⁱ Fredthompsonshow.com, interview archives, 07/16/09.
ⁱⁱ Fox News, *The O'Reilly Factor*, July 17th, 2009.
ⁱⁱⁱ MSNBC, *Morning Joe* July 31st, 2009.
^{iv} http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=113851103434
^v <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1319/death-panels-republicans-fox-viewers>
^{vi} Patrick Buchanan opinion piece, Creators.com 2009. (<http://www.creators.com/opinion/pat-buchanan/sarah-and-the-death-panels.html>)
^{vii} *The Times*, February 28th, 1975
^{viii} Tony Blair, speech to the Reuters news agency, June 12th 2007
^{ix} BBC Pulse – National Representative Sample 2011
^x Ipsos Mori – BBC News Economy Research for BBC Audiences 2012
^{xi} Clause 163 (page 159) of the Health and Social Care Bill
^{xii} *Guardian* March 8th 2012 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/08/nhs-bill-lib-dem-defining-moment>)
^{xiii} *Guardian* March 16th 2012 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/16/who-right-on-nhs-polly-shirley>)
^{xiv} Quoted in *The Observer* March 11th 2012, page 3.
^{xv} *Ibid.*
^{xvi} Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*
^{xvii} Ipsos MORI *No decision with me? The NHS in 2012*, September 2012
^{xviii} <http://www.redstate.com/erick/2012/01/25/romney-advisor-no-obamacare-repeal/>
^{xix} Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II, XL 2
^{xx} *Ibid.*, I cxxxix 4
^{xxi} Thomas Habinek, *Ancient Rhetoric and Oratory*, Malden/Oxford 2005
^{xxii} Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, III, LXXX 4
^{xxiii} Sallust, *The War With Cataline*, LII, 11
^{xxiv} Plato, *Gorgias* p463 D (p. 314/5 in the Loeb edition)
^{xxv} Plato, *The Republic*, VIII 10 ff.
^{xxvi} http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-luntz/words-2011_b_829603.html
^{xxvii} *Ibid.*
^{xxviii} *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2012
^{xxix} T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 'Little Gidding' II.