NOTEBOOK

Harold Wilson's rhetoric

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Revisiting the Wilsonian language of renewal

Harold Wilson's 1963 'White Heat' speech still has impact today because it challenged some of the very fundamentals of British socialism. It demonstrated that renewal was not only possible but also necessary, and so represented something of a watershed in Labour's evolution. Put simply, old agendas revolving around heavy industry and trade union rights verses a new economy that embraced the realities of an increasingly interconnected global economy were brought forward by the speech. 'Wilson did indeed seek to project an image of the Labour Party as a dynamic and modernising force' although 'this message was underpinned with a warning that economic decline and national irrelevance would be the inevitable consequence of a failure to adapt to technological change. There was thus an undercurrent of fear and foreboding in a speech that was otherwise characterised by its hopefulness and optimism' (Francis, 2013). It helped keep Labour relevant by kick-starting that debate in British politics, and by showing how the party could adapt to the onset of new technologies and ideas, whilst simultaneously connecting them to the changing face of the British economy.

As Ed Miliband continues remoulding Labour's economic and social vision through One Nation Labour, it seems fitting to look back at the role played by the speech in Wilson's renewal of the Labour party in the 1960s. Significant works on Wilson's political career have been produced by Ben Pimlott, Philip Ziegler, and Thomas Hennessey, illustrating the character, successes and failures of Labour's first post-Attlee Prime Minister. It is not my intention to revisit any of these, which are thoroughly explored in existing Labour scholarship. As a result I have chosen a more distinctive route to focus on his White Heat speech, through the presentation of a few thoughts on his use of rhetoric.

My objective is briefly to scrutinise the *content* of the speech at the time of delivery. I am purposefully shying away from the subsequent political realities because they are beyond the scope of classical analysis of specific rhetorical devices.

What is rhetoric?

To analyse the 'White Heat' speech, I use three classical rhetorical devices as identified by Aristotle, namely *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*:

> To define briefly, *ethos* is the character and credibility of the orator, required in order to have rhetorical integrity with a chosen audience. Without such credibility an audience cannot be convinced of the argument, given that the trustworthy character of the speaker is undermined. *Pathos* is the capacity to generate emotion in an audience. This can be used to mould the audience into supporting the argument by alluding to some sense of common objective or belief. *Logos* relates to the convincing logic of a chosen argument, as without a logical basis any orator would find their position unappealing. (Crines, 2012, 84)

Each device can be taken in isolation for the purposes of academic analysis, but for a politician they tend to be interdependent. The combination of the use of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* varies between speakers, and can depend on the audience and its expectations. I will return to this at the end of the article. But Wilson can justly be described as a skilful communicator who drew from each of these devices. I will now briefly discuss the speech in relation to the three rhetorical devices.

Ethos

The first device to consider is *ethos*. The character of the speech is undoubtedly one of progress. It looked into the future in a manner that unsettled some of the traditionalists in the audience, who saw Labour's reason for being as protecting British workers from the very thing Wilson was suggesting they should embrace. But he attacked such traditionalists saying 'there is no room for Luddites in the Labour Party' (Wilson, 1963). What was in it for the miner, the steel worker, or the foundry engineer if Britain invested more in higher education to advance the sciences? Why should the Labour movement abandon its traditional moral ethical roots to embrace a strange new technological future which, to some extent, risked their jobs? Wilson retorted that the changes were already underway in the Soviet Union, United States, and other places and if Britain wanted the similar prosperity required to protect jobs it had to tap into that changing global economy. 'Already in the engineering and automobile industries in the United States they have reached a point where a

programme-controlled machine tool line can produce an entire motorcar – and I mean an American motorcar, with all the gimmicks on it – without the application of human skill or effort' (Wilson, 1963). Given the declining traditional economy, a new reinvestment strategy was needed that looked forward rather than back and could embrace new technologies. Wilson added that if the state was to be used to mould the future of British enterprise, that re-moulding would transform the nature of British socialism. 'These facts, these inescapable facts, put the whole argument about industry and economics and socialism into a new perspective' (Wilson, 1963). Thus, the character of the speech was one of challenge to the Labour aristocracy rather than comfort, whilst simultaneously providing hope for a doubtful future.

Importantly, the speech tapped into a sense of Wilson's *newness* – politically, he wanted to embody that future as an electoral strategy. Certainly coming off the back of the defeats and divisions of the 1950s, Wilson's new message of hope for Labour and its future was that it should embrace science rather than fear it: 'We must harness socialism to science, and science to socialism' (Wilson, 1963). The debates over nationalisation and state ownership should be shifted towards technological change and education, to use the tools of socialism to inject a slice of a 'future socialist utopia' from the twenty-first century into 1960s Britain. Most important was the reliance on equality to ensure that education reforms match the needs of the future vis-à-vis a comprehensive education system. 'We simply cannot as a nation afford to neglect the educational development of a single boy or girl. We cannot afford to cut off three quarters or more of our children from virtually any chance of higher education. The Russians do not, the Germans do not, the Americans do not, the Japanese do not, and we cannot afford to either' (Wilson, 1963).

His message was that only Labour could achieve this revolution and that Britain should 'reject the Conservatives solution of mass depopulation of Britain's industrial areas' (Wilson, 1963). It can also be argued that Wilson thought opponents within the Labour Party shared with the Conservatives this lack of technological vision. The shop steward who saw personal gain as a justification for the next strike; the dogmatic Marxist who saw class war as the only way to socialist Britain; the activist that defined Labour purely as a defensive movement against other classes. These were the Labour aristocracy who too may have held back his message, so to these he sought to bring them on side by urging unity in the face of the need to look to the future. The facts of industrial change, 'these inescapable facts, put the whole argument about socialism in a new perspective' which goes beyond traditional divisions about social class.

Succinctly, the rhetorical *ethos* Wilson used was the need to accept change as

inevitable. It was already happening on the global stage, so Britain and Labour would have to respond. The Tory and Labour elites risked holding Britain back with their ideological dogmatism, and so to these factions he argued the 'White Heat' of technological change was a reality from which they could not hide.

Pathos

The second rhetorical device looks at emotion. The *pathos* of Wilson's speech was a curious one. Often orators draw on humour or anger to compel an audience to action, or indeed inaction. Humour is entertaining; anger can be a huge motivator if used in the right way. These two emotions tend to be sufficient in making a strong impact upon the audience.

But Wilson used neither of these. Instead, he used *fear*. Wilson argued that if the labour movement failed to embrace the realities of global technological change it would reduce Britain to a virtual irrelevance and an economic backwater. Without technological change, 'let us be clear that in America today and in Britain tomorrow we face massive redundancies in office work no less than in industry.' Moreover, 'if man is not going to assert his control over machines, the machines are going to assert their control over man'. He continued: 'the problem is this. Since technological progress left to the mechanism of private industry and private property can lead only to high profits for a few, a high rate of employment for a few, and to mass redundancies for the many, if there had never been a case for socialism before, automation would have created it' (Wilson, 1963). Politically his socialist renewal strategy was dependent upon creating two rhetorical narratives, one leading to destitution and the other leading to progress through scientific innovation. This was his overarching political theme, which he supported the following year with his book *The Relevance of British Socialism*. Fear was also evoked through Wilson's argument that Labour as a party risked decline unless it embraced his agenda. Adapt or die was his message. Labour's connection with declining industries risked taking the party with them unless it renewed both.

But the key fear motivator here was economic. Economic inaction, or protectionism of traditional industries, would ultimately lead to Britain's place in the world declining. Those industries which the trade unionists wanted to protect would not be sustainable in the technological future, Wilson believed, because new economic realities superseded ideology. The pillars of the new economy would be new energy sources, education, what we know of today as the 'knowledge economy'. For Wilson, it had to be guided by the state rather than left to the market. That aspect of tradi-

tional Labour rhetoric remained, giving them hope whilst the focus had to shift from the old to the new. Convincing the audience of the immediacy and need for such a shift required this emotional motivation.

Logos

The final rhetorical device I will examine is *logos*. In any speech a clear message the audience connects to is needed. This is the overarching theme that compels the audience to lend them their ears. For Wilson, the logic of his argument was practical. Because of the rise of automation in the US, the new speeding up of computing technologies and the impact that it was having on industries such as car production, the UK risked being unable to keep up with these more efficient economies. Put simply, the traditional methods of production were too slow to keep up with these changing times. Since the labour movement represented the bulk of those workers through the affiliated unions, convincing them that the choice was between new technologies and decline was a vital part of the speech.

A key part of Wilson's *logos* was that technological advancement would create new jobs. 'Allowing for the fact that the automative revolution here will be later and slower, we have to be ready to create 10 million new jobs in Britain by, say, the mid-1970s' (Wilson, 1963). This of course taps into the innate implication that the older industries would decline. But whilst the mines may be closing, new opportunities would open up. To generate these new opportunities, Wilson was clear about his proposed strategy.

> First, we must produce more scientists. Secondly, having produced them we must be a great deal more successful in keeping them in this country. Thirdly, having trained them and kept them here, we must make more intelligent use of them when they are trained than we do with those we have got. Fourthly, we must organise British industry so that it applies the results of scientific research more purposively to our national production effort. These, then, are the four tasks'

which represent the ballast of Wilson's logos (Wilson, 1963). He continued by emphasising the importance of educational reform, stressing that 'to train the scientists we are going to need will mean a revolution in our attitude to education, not only higher education but at every level' because 'as a nation we cannot afford to force segregation on our children at the 11-plus stage' (sic) (Wilson, 1963). Therefore the logical basis of Wilson's argument is that it can only be achieved by educational reforms that 'believe in equality of opportunity' (Wilson, 1963).

It would be facile to suggest that Wilson turned the entire labour movement towards embracing technological change in one speech. However, the logic of his argument strove to appeal to those who recognised the necessity. Moreover, by appealing to their instincts as a collective movement he was hoping the logic behind connecting socialist principles with investment in science and education would renew socialism in such a way as to make it relevant in this changing world. Indeed, if the new economy was technologically progressive, held together by collective instincts, whilst simultaneously guided by the state, he was able to show the world that Britain could out-do them using social democratic principles. By doing so, he hoped Britain may be able to compete with the freer market in the US and the communist theology of the Soviet Union.

Yet by presenting a seemingly logical plan to run alongside the broad aspirational rhetoric of renewal, Wilson sought to convince his audience that his logic was not only theoretically possible but also practically vital. Thus he was able to lay the foundations for a new dimension to Labour – Labour as the party of practical, ideological, and technological change. Of course, whether this resonated with the trade union elite representing the older heavy industries is a matter for scrutiny elsewhere, but the point is Wilson's 'White Heat' speech exploded onto the labour movement with the intention of changing it in such a way as to keep the party relevant in the evolving world.

Summary

To begin summing up I shall now briefly rhetorically analyse the totality of the speech using the rhetorical devices interdependently. First, the audience accepted Wilson's credibility in making this speech because he was new. *New* Leader, *New* Labour, *New* Vision. Wilson had a clear vision for his renewal strategy. It was important for Wilson to keep Labour confident that the divisive years of the 1950s had been put behind them once and for all. The ideological feuds between the Bevanites and the Gaitskellites could, Wilson hoped, be united behind his argument for scientific socialism. This was an implicit intention, given the speech was focused firmly on the future, but clearly Wilson was crying out for unity behind a specific vision of change. In fact it could well be argued Wilson strove for a new Labour Party on day one, but that would be to overstate its subsequent impact, which is explored in other places. Second, because Wilson's *ethos* was strong with the audience, he was able to draw in *pathos* to inject fear as a motivating factor. Fear of irrelevance, fear of losing your position, fear of capitalism dominating the future. This made them more likely to accept the *logos* of the speech, that of identifying a path away from that fear through

renewal. Because of his *ethos*, he was able to use sprinklings of *pathos* to ensure they accepted the *logos* of his argument. That is how he was able to connect rhetorically with the audience, and that is why they listened to his argument.

Of course, history played out differently. The realities of devaluation, losing office in 1970, the oil crisis of 1973, the collapse of Labour unity as evident by the rise of militant groups, Wilson's unexpected departure in 1976, and of course the long years in opposition between 1979 and 1997 conspired against the vision laid out in the 'White Heat' speech. Recession, division, and neo-liberalism coloured the years Wilson argued were vital for Britain to become a technological competitor with the US and USSR. But does that make the speech any less relevant given the specific context and time of its delivery? I would suggest it was a speech that gave Labour back its sense of hope for the future, even if that future didn't materialise in the way Wilson expected or hoped for. But looking back on it over 50 years later, it was undeniably a sea-change in Labour thinking and demonstrates that renewal is a fundamental part of Labour's successful evolution. Because of Wilson's 'White Heat' speech, Labour showed it could renew whilst retaining its values at the centre, which remains a key tool in any reconstruction of Labour politics. Indeed, it is possible that Ed Miliband could benefit by paying heed to Wilson's use of the rhetorical devices and how they enabled him to articulate a centrist vision. Further research may also reveal rhetorical similarities between Wilson's scientific socialism and Miliband's on-going renewal strategies communicated through One Nation Labour, particularly in the run up to the general election and beyond.

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