

Parliamentary Speech

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Mr Speaker

"Men and women of Australia". The words are Gough Whitlam's, beginning at Bankstown the policy speech in his victorious campaign for election. They are also John Curtin's, campaigning in 1943 for re-election, and before that, on 8 December 1941: "Men and women of Australia. We are at war with Japan." It's less well known they are also the words of R G Menzies, speaking earlier in the war as Prime Minister. Men and women of Australia saw and heard Whitlam's words on television. They heard Curtin's and Menzies' words on the radio. Only by television and radio could a political leader address the whole nation at once, though in days before radio he might use such a form of address to them as readers of his words. When Alfred Deakin delivered his policy speech for the election of 1903 he didn't actually use the phrase; but he did address both "the men of Australia" and "the women of Australia"; and that was the first time a national party leader would think of speaking to the women, for in 1902 women had just been given the vote.

The Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition can never use that form of address in parliament. In this building he is supposed to address only the chair: Mr Speaker in the House of Representatives, Mr President in the Senate. From 1986 to 1989, Madam Speaker. Members are not delivering addresses, as on the hustings: they are engaged in debates. I'm interpreting my brief narrowly, saying little about the words politicians speak outside

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parliament when they address the men and women of Australia, or the electors of Woop Woop, or red-eyed listeners at a hundred dollar a plate breakfast.

For a historian it's a thrill to be speaking on this subject in the very home of parliamentary speech: the third home of the Commonwealth parliament, or the fourth if we count the Exhibition building in Melbourne where its first speeches were made.

Hansard

Just about every word spoken in the Commonwealth parliament over almost 100 years is recorded in print. What a gift that is for historians! The volumes of parliamentary debates are by far our largest repository of reported speech. Their reports are said to be "verbatim", but they have never quite been that. The founder of the Victorian Hansard once explained to a new member that its purpose was "To preserve the idiom of Parliament, but not the idiots". Some remarks are deleted from the record by direction of the President and Speaker. Clumsy diction is made neater. Interjections are recorded only when the member on his feet replies to them. Sledging across the floor between seated members is not recorded. Members have the right to see and revise proofs of their own remarks. They are exhorted not to add to or alter what they said. In his admirable history, *Acts of Parliament*, Gavin Souter judges: "Hansard's accuracy as a full transcript of words actually uttered was always open to some doubt". Alterations of form are judged to be more legitimate than alterations of substance. William Morris Hughes observed in 1909 that Hansard should "present a readable report of what he [a member] would have said had he been addressing an audience having the manners to listen to him" But the changes went beyond that. Once when a Hansard reporter protested about a member writing into his proof an attack on another member which he hadn't actually made, the Speaker ruled the passage had to be incorporated in Hansard because the word of a member must be accepted. In 1947, not long after the ABC had begun to broadcast parliamentary debates, the Labor member Rowley James was speaking on the Chifley government's fatal bill to nationalize banking. He paused to send this message to his dentist in Sydney: "Milton, get my teeth ready this week-end, if you're listening. It's a cheap way of sending a telegram."

Whether Milton was listening, reporters in the press gallery were, and it was news next morning. But it's not in Hansard. Either James or Hansard

decided not to report this rare case of a member misusing the broadcasting of parliament as some people had feared they would. On the other hand, Hansard does report James in that same speech quoting a letter from a constituent saying: "The Bank Bill should of been passed bloody years ago." "Order!" says the Speaker. "The Honourable member is not entitled to use such language." I'll return to that theme in a moment.

Hansard is all the more valuable as a record of parliamentary speech in our own time because newspapers report so much less of it than they did a hundred, fifty, even twenty years ago. Apart from exchanges at question time, even the wordiest of our papers now report little of what's said in parliament. This is true not only in Australia but in the city where parliamentary reporting began, London. Speeches in the British parliament, as in ours, are now televised; but viewers in both countries are more likely to see members speaking than to hear them, in news bulletins where the voice heard most is the reporter's, paraphrasing or analysing or even deriding what the member is saying. Except for a short sound-bite permitted to the speaker, we just see his or hear mouth moving, in a manner the victims have labelled "goldfishing".

Free Speech

Hansard is a record of *free* speech. Within parliament, speech can in a precise sense be freer than anywhere else; for Australian legislatures have inherited the British tradition permitting members to say with impunity things which outside parliament would provoke prosecution or litigation. Even if members should WANT to divest themselves of the privilege of free speech, they can't. So, at any rate, ruled Archie Cameron as Speaker when W.C. Wentworth tried to waive privilege as an act of contrition for wrongly naming the author Kylie Tennant a Communist.

No member has been expelled for anything said in the federal parliament, though one has been expelled by vote of the House for a statement made elsewhere. That was Hugh Mahon, expelled in 1920 for saying at a public meeting of protest against British policy in Ireland "this bloody and accursed empire" (or possibly "this bloody and accursed despotism"). Mahon was more harshly treated than another Irish-born Irish nationalist, Mick Considine from Broken Hill, who became in 1918 the only member of parliament ever suspended three times in one session, and who at the time of his third suspension was just out of jail, where he had been sent for three weeks for

saying, not in parliament: "Bugger the King, he is a bloody German bastard."

Speech *about* parliament is not free, as we have lately been reminded by the judge who sent Albert Langer to Pentridge for refusing to stop publishing and distributing leaflets advising people how to vote in a manner which will not favour either of the major parties, which he calls Tweedledum and Tweedledee. It would be reassuring to have the provision of the Commonwealth Electoral Act authorising this conviction removed by the parliament elected in March, 1996.

There are two limits to the freedom of parliamentary speech. First, members can't go on speaking forever. In the early years of the Commonwealth parliament, they could; but step by step governments moved to limit members' time, by the device of the closure, or gag, or guillotine, and by setting time limits. The Senate adopted a limit of one hour in 1919, after Albert Gardiner, leader of the Labor opposition, had spoken for twelve hours and forty minutes, from 10.03 p.m. on 13 November 1918 until 10.43 a.m. next day. He had a good tactical reason for doing it, but his colleagues decided enough was enough. All standing orders controlling the length of speeches and other matters were temporary until 1950, when a permanent set of orders was adopted. The parliament assembling that year was larger than the one that had sat since 1901: 60 Senators instead of 36, 121 Representatives instead of 74. Unless the houses were to sit for more days each year, time for parliamentary speech had to be rationed more severely. Henceforth the minister introducing a bill could have 45 minutes instead of an hour, speeches on the second reading would last only 30 minutes instead of 45, speeches on the adjournment ten minutes instead of 15, no-confidence motion and Address-in-Reply speeches, 25 minutes instead of 35. The guillotine could make speeches shorter any time the party with a majority in a house wanted, and parties in Opposition have consistently complained governments use that device to curtail unwanted speech.

Not every member has needed the time limit or the guillotine. When W.M. Jack, popular Liberal member for North Sydney, rose on 29 August 1962 to make his first speech in seven years, he began a tedious defence of the budget with the words "I can remain silent no longer". More recently the Labor member Russ Gorman said nothing at all, so Alan Ramsay tells us, between his maiden speech in 1983 and his valedictory speech in 1995. No standing order had impeded these members' right to free speech; they had simply chosen not to exercise it.

The second impediment to free speech is the power of presiding officers to decide what language is fit for parliament. The convention of privilege has encouraged expressions of insult, invective, accusation and ridicule, some of which could not safely be used outside parliament; but the Speaker and the President, and their equivalents in state houses, do draw limits. What the limits are, nobody quite knows. There is no lexicon of prohibited words. Speakers and Presidents are accused by Oppositions of being more lenient to members of their own parties, and that charge is more plausibly laid in Australia, where the presiding officer remains a member of his or her party, than at Westminster, where the Speaker forswears party allegiance once elected to the chair. Contexts matter. Terms of abuse become more or less shocking over time, according to what Frank Devine has nicely called a recalibration of the vernacular. To him, and through him to Senator Amanda Vanstone, I owe the statistic that the record for reproofs from the chair in the Senate from 1976 to 1988 is held by Peter Walsh, who carried his bat into voluntary retirement after scoring 48. The list of Walshisms runs alphabetically from "blackmailer", "bought off", "bullshit" and "bully" to "vexatious geriatric", "wretched creature" and "yobbo". Next, a long way behind Senator Walsh, came Gareth Evans and Fred Chaney with 15.

Styles of Abuse

The language of that Senator from Western Australia prompts caution on two conclusions about parliamentary invective. The first is that Senate speech is more genteel than House speech, and the second is that New South Wales produces proportionately more champions of insult than other states. Nevertheless I think both judgments have some validity. Peter Walsh's speech may have been unusual for a Senator; after all, he did score more than three times as many reproofs as his nearest rivals. Pam Peters' computer analysis of 650,000 words spoken over four days in each House during March 1986 reveals a difference in styles of abuse which the author suggests is connected with Senators having more time to speak than members of the House. "The terms of abuse in the Lower House", she writes, "are direct, definitely ad hominem, and designed to knock someone out". "Abuse in the Senate", by contrast, "seems to take a more leisurely and contrived form - through clusters of words applied in such a way as to flay the opponent piece by piece." Senatorial abuse, she writes, "is aimed more at the opponent's style of argument, and legislative insights, than at the person himself or herself." This difference in the idioms of abuse Mrs Peters sees as part of a more general difference: between "the plain, down-to-earth, concrete nouns

of the Lower House; and the more academic, detached, abstract words of the Upper House".**

The view that New South Wales grows the ripest insults isn't refuted by one fruity example from the west. No less an authority than Ben Chifley encourages us to see something in it. "If the Honourable Member wishes to indulge in that kind of language", Chifley once said, "I would just remind him that I learned my politics in the New South Wales Labor Party". Paul Keating, who also learned his politics there, has a larger reputation for abusive parliamentary speech than his predecessors Bob Hawke and Malcolm Fraser from Victoria. Has any other political leader provoked the publication of a pamphlet by opponents assaulting his vocabulary? A Liberal publication of 1992 shows a stream of obscenities coming out of his mouth. "Jobs, work and kids, they're four letter words to Mr Keating", says the text. The two of his nouns attracting most attention have nine letters and seven: "sleazebag" and "scumbag". "Scumbag" originally meant condom; "sleazebag" has more elusive origins. Both were put into currency, if the Macquarie Dictionary of New Words is right, in *Hill Street Blues*, which first appeared on television in 1981. They are items in the Americanisation of our popular culture. Mike Secombe in the *Sydney Morning Herald* says Mr Keating has used the word "scumbag" only once, in 1984; but it has stuck to him: readers of London tabloids could easily think that it's his normal working word for the Opposition.

Gough Whitlam was as severe as anybody in his abuse of opponents. He too came from New South Wales, but my guess is that only during the war, serving in the Air Force, did he enjoy prolonged exposure to the vernacular tradition that nurtured Ben Chifley and Paul Keating. Whitlam's idiom of abuse was his own. As Prime Minister, taunting an opponent for being a heavy drinker:

Mr Whitlam: Look at his bleary face.

Mr Snedden: You are being gutless.

Mr Whitlam: It is what he put in his guts that rooted him.

Mr Snedden takes a point of order, the Speaker instructs the Prime Minister to withdraw the remark, and the Prime Minister does so, but only after making sure that members have heard it. As Deputy Leader of the Opposition in 1960, Gough Whitlam calls Sir Garfield Barwick a liar, and

** This study is reproduced in this issue of the Journal. See pages 163-170.

refuses to withdraw, saying "This truculent runt thinks he can get away with anything." Pressed to withdraw, he withdraws. Sir Garfield Barwick leaves the chamber weeping.

Have Labor members whatever their state of origin been more inclined than their opponents to use abusive language? When Joseph Lyons and some of his comrades left the Labor Party to form the United Australia Party in 1931 their new ally John Latham reported: "Lyons told me it was a revelation to 'his mates' to be treated like gentlemen. They were accustomed in the Labor Party room to vile abuse - to violent language - and to threats of physical violence. He gave me the impression that his people were saying 'Farver, is this 'eaven?'"

Well, maybe, and up to a point, they were saying that. Perhaps Labor men's abuse, in and out of parliament, has been customarily more colloquial, earthier, closer to the idiom of the mine and the factory and the shearing shed. Rowley James, says Gavin Souter, "had learnt his oratory at pit top meetings". But Paul Hasluck, who had learned his oratory at meetings of the Salvation Army, said of Gough Whitlam, or rather, breaching protocol, said TO Gough Whitlam: "You are one of the filthiest objects ever to come into this chamber". Mr Whitlam, who was just about to drink from a glass of water, responded by throwing its contents at Mr Hasluck's face. Not the glass, just the water. So free have our parliaments been from violence, give or take the odd scuffle in colonial and state legislatures, that the incident has become famous. You can hear it and imagine seeing it re-enacted in the sound and light display at the old Parliament House. Perhaps, on the whole, anti-Labor abuse has been less vulgar than Labor abuse; but not, I think, less nasty or cruel. Sir Earle Page, resigning from R G Menzies' cabinet in 1939, made what Gavin Souter describes as "one of the most vicious and ill-judged attacks ever made in the House". Its climax was a condemnation of Menzies for not serving in the Great War. Hansard records an interjection not from Menzies" and Page's side of the House but across the chamber, from Rowley James: "That is dirt!"

Probably the most wounding insults ever exchanged in parliament, though we now may find this hard to appreciate, were on this subject of who went and who didn't go to the war of 1914-1918: on whose hands was the blood of the dead soldiers?

I hope someone using Pam Peters' method will do a thorough classification of themes in abusive parliamentary speech, including an analysis of what

presiding officers tolerate and what they don't. I wonder how the following impressions would stand up to such systematic research. Here (with thanks to Frank Devine, Amanda Vanstone and Gavin Souter) are four themes recurring in parliamentary abuse.

First, members are compared to animals

As the constitutional crisis of 1975 moved towards its climax, Souter reports, "The Senate rang with epithets like "dingo", "swine", "mongrel", and "cur", while in the House, writes the historian, himself swept up in this animal imagery, "Whitlam and Fraser locked horns like two bull mooses." In 1970 the Speaker made a member withdraw both "dingo" and its proposed substitute "tame dog". During Malcolm Fraser's Prime Ministership Paul Keating was ordered to withdraw after quoting an old farmer in Queensland who watched Fraser on television and said: "Son, if I had a dog with eyes as close together as that I would shoot it." Mr Keating withdrew, and settled for calling Mr Fraser "the most untrustworthy Prime Minister in the history of this Federation", which was allowed. Mr Keating has a taste for dogs. His opponents, he said once, were like dogs returning to their vomit; Dr Hewson was a "dog with a belly full of piss". "Cur" and "Kerr" became an appealing pun for Labor people after Gough Whitlam invented it for Sir John on 11 November 1975. "Cur" had long been a favourite term of abuse. "A cur and a skunk", Senator Justin O'Byrne called the Leader of the Opposition Reg Withers, in 1973, and added that Senator Gair was a toad. Ordered to moderate his language, O'Byrne changed "toad" to "bull frog", saying "90 per cent frog - and ten per cent bull".

"Skunk" has also enjoyed long popularity, combining as it does animality and stench. "You dirty skunks", says a member in 1910. "Rat", another popular word, also connects animality with dirt and in Labor parlance with treachery as well.

Dirt is a second continuing theme

"That is dirt", said Rowley James. "You are one of the filthiest objects ever to come into this chamber", said Sir Paul Hasluck. The dirtiest of dirt is invoked, from source to destination. Turd; bullshit. In debate on Menzies' bill to ban the Communist Party in 1950, Rowley James called the "onus of proof" clause the anus of proof. When Gough Whitlam described a statement of his government's achievements, using Cardinal Newman's title, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Billie Snedden made a pun on the word "sua". The most

civilized of parliamentarians, Alfred Deakin, ordered in 1904 to withdraw an imputation of falsehood against William Morris Hughes, blamed the likes of Hughes for making the likes of Deakin use dirty language. "It happens sometimes to all of us, that as we pass along the streets of the city, we meet men engaged filling drays with dirt and garbage, and unless one is discreet some of that dust and refuse may drift upon him".

A third theme: moral deficiency

Opponents tell lies. They are cowards: "Never has a Prime Minister evinced such cowardly disgraceful behaviour", says Reg Withers of Gough Whitlam on 15 October 1975 as the Opposition moves in for the kill. One appeal of "cur" is that it combines animality and cowardice. Opponents are traitors, betrayers: "Let that Judas tell us how many pieces of silver he will get", said Paul Keating, accusing Malcolm Fraser of selling his own sheep's wool to the Soviet Union while expecting Australian athletes to boycott the Moscow Olympics. That was by no means Judas' first appearance in our parliamentary rhetoric. When Deakin's party brought down Andrew Fisher's Labor ministry in 1909 Sir William Lyne told a reporter over a whisky that he would point at Deakin in the House and say "Judas! Judas! Judas!" And so he did. He was ordered to withdraw; but next day Labor members pursued the comparison. William Morris Hughes dissociated himself from it as "not fair - to Judas, for whom there is this to be said, that he did not gag the man whom he betrayed, nor did he fail to hang himself afterwards". As Hughes would have known, that thrust had been made in the House of Commons in the 1850s.

A fourth theme: stupidity

Often, immorality and stupidity together. Deakin's accuser Sir William Lyne called another member that same year, 1909, "a liar and an arrant empty-headed humbug". Bill Hayden described the Fraser ministry in 1978 as "a government of lies, of little lies and big lies and, most often, stupid lies". Frank Devine counts four idiots, two dopeys, four sillies, two morons and a dolt, and concludes that Senators seem to regard lack of intelligence as the most contemptible flaw.

Presiding officers are routinely accused of giving members of the governing parties (who put them there) more license in the use of offensive language. Parties in opposition suggest from time to time the introduction of a neutral

Speaker as a means of even-handedly reducing abuse, but once in office they find insuperable difficulties in the way of that reform.

It's easy to exaggerate the incidence of abuse. Any colour stands out in the greyness of Hansard, and a salty insult can grab headlines more easily than a temperate argument. Most of it is heard, and now seen, at question time.

Question Time

Question time is an institution peculiar to parliamentary democracy. The president in a congressional system doesn't expose himself to interrogation in a house of which he is not a member. The questions are supposed to do no more than elicit information from a minister; but governments and oppositions in Westminster and the dominions have long used the time for more than that. In the Commonwealth parliament the practice was informal until written into those standing orders of 1950. Since then ministers have adopted the habit of reading their answers, especially to Dorothy Dixers asked dutifully by their own backbenchers but also to questions from the other side, speaking either from briefs written by public servants who have spent the morning preparing draft answers for PPQs (possible parliamentary questions) or from scripts they are determined to use whether or not their content is relevant to the question. The *Sydney Morning Herald* lamented in 1993 that both sides "regard the floor of the House during Question Time as a bearpit." "A test of strength and nerve, a sort of virility ritual", says Peter Cole-Adams in the *Canberra Times*. Barry Jones more genially describes it as theatre. Reporters write up the contest as if they are drama critics, and encourage members in their possibly mistaken belief that wins and losses in question time are of great moment in the electorate.

The Masters

Who have been our best parliamentary speakers? How do we judge them? By performance in the bearpit of question time, or in the usually more tranquil passages of debate on motions? And unless we've actually seen and heard them ourselves, how do we know what they were like? How do we animate in our minds the printed words of Hansard? Judging past speakers, we have to rely pretty much on what contemporaries thought of them. Judging present speakers we have to deal with the complication of not being sure whose words they are speaking.

Reluctantly I ignore for this occasion speakers in colonial and state parliaments. In early Commonwealth parliaments the most admired creator of parliamentary speech was Alfred Deakin. An English connoisseur, Leo Amery, said of Deakin: "for sheer fervid, sustained emotional and intellectual flow of eloquence I have not heard his equal ... the greatest orator of my day - in English". Deakin's biographer John La Nauze scores Deakin high on all tests except possibly a sense of theatre.

We have R G Menzies' judgments in 1945, written candidly, a son of his principal opponents in parliament. "Evatt is a debater who loses his temper and is almost a genius for the disorderly presentation of a case. Calwell is under the impression that vulgar personal abuse couched in the coarsest and most extravagant language is a sign of mental virility." He was a bit more respectful towards the wartime prime minister John Curtin, though critical of his passion for Latin abstract nouns, remarking that Curtin would never say "war" or "battlefield" if he could get away with "theatre of disputation". Menzies judged Curtin not a good debater "in the true sense", the true sense being forensic. Curtin had been brought up to speak not in law courts, as Menzies was, but at public meetings where your voice had to hit the back of the hall. At necessary moments during the war Curtin could speak with a simple and inspiring eloquence. Listen to the tribute of a reporter who was in the press gallery when Curtin spoke to the House in May 1942 just after the battle of the Coral Sea. The journalist is moved by what he calls "that indefinable projection of personal sincerity which, on subjects that stir him greatly, gives Mr Curtin a grip over actual audiences that can never quite be conveyed to those who hear only his broadcasts or read reports of what he has said. No one who participated in the few minutes in which Mr Curtin was addressing the House failed to come out of them a better Australian."

I doubt whether anybody said that about a speech by Sir Robert Menzies. William Morris Hughes, a parliamentarian for half a century, and himself praised by a shrewd judge for "his unrivalled command of the spoken word", said of Menzies: "He does not have the power to move or inspire great crowds, or bodies of troops. But" - he goes on - "when it comes to Parliament I truly consider that Menzies is not only the best debater I have ever heard, but in my judgment the greatest who ever lived. And I have read Burke, Cicero, Randolph Churchill [the father of Winston, not the son], Pitt and Fox." The judicious assessment of Menzies' colleague Sir Paul Hasluck was that he gave a higher place to the arts and skills of advocacy than to oratory - that he was *too* forensic - and that when he did attempt heightened utterance he might miss the target, as in his gushing address to the Queen in

Parliament House: ("I did but see her passing by/And yet I love her till I die.") When I asked Sir Paul Hasluck near the end of his life which speeches he remembered, he recalled only one from parliament, and that on a ceremonial occasion rather than in debate: John Howard at the opening of the new Parliament House by the Queen in 1988. He didn't mention any by Gough Whitlam.

Gough Whitlam must rank high among our masters of parliamentary speech. John La Nauze called Alfred Deakin's excellence as an orator "surpassingly rare." "His countrymen", he wrote, "still remain among the most slovenly public speakers in the world." If that's true, what a pleasing paradox that the party of labour should have chosen as federal leader, and voters allowed to become prime minister, a man so lucid, meticulous, pedantic, at home with classical modes, and altogether unslovenly in his speech! Will this building ever hear another man, or a woman, who could compare an antagonist with Ovid, and in the Roman poet's own language? Speaking of Malcolm Fraser in those October days of 1975, Whitlam tells the House: "As another self-indulgent wool grower said in putting personal interests ahead of the nation's interest, *video meliora proboque; deteriora sequor*". (He didn't translate, so I won't either.) Arrogance is a quality ascribed to Mr Whitlam, as to Menzies, as to Mr Keating. Has Whitlam an edge on Menzies for capacity in articulating emotion? To go outside Parliament House for a moment, the meeting at Blacktown in 1972 that began "Men and women of Australia" is described by Graham Freudenberg as "not so much a public meeting as an act of communion and a celebration of hope and love".

Not that Graham Freudenberg was a disinterested listener to that speech. He wrote it.

Speech Writers

"I never employed a speech-writer myself", said Menzies in retirement; " ... I had an obstinate objection to having other people's words put into my mouth". He's not saying he never had speeches written for him, by public servants and others. Many speeches spoken in parliament over the decades have been written by other people; I myself have written one or two. Menzies is saying he never employed a speech-writer; that's a novelty which came to Australia from the USA in the 1960s. Graham Freudenberg wrote first for Calwell, then for Whitlam. Don Watson wrote for Paul Keating, and observed recently that Menzies had a great deal more time to write his speeches than contemporary prime ministers. "These days he could no more

do it all alone than they could take a boat to a London conference". Sometimes Paul Keating's words entirely Don Watson's, sometimes not. Watson describes speech-writers as "value-adders; they take the raw material and cook it. They make a meal of it. They are rarely alone in the kitchen, however". Reporters commonly praise Watson's texts and deplore Keating's leaden delivery of them. Where *gravity* is what's required, the match is perfect. The speech Watson wrote and Mr Keating read for the funeral of the unknown Australian soldier was most movingly fit for that event. On other occasions Mr Keating's reading can sound funereal when that isn't the required tone. He can mumble through a fine script, and then, answering questions off the cuff, shine and sparkle. When he reads a speech in parliament the listener, the spectator, always senses the possibility that Mr Keating will raise his eyes from the script and let fly.

We don't hear of any partnership on the other side of parliament quite like Freudenberg's with Whitlam or Watson's with Keating. John Howard I mentioned as the one parliamentarian who had made a speech Sir Paul Hasluck remembered. Mr Howard rarely reads a speech. When he resumed the Leader's chair in the House last year, Geoff Kitney thought his speech on a motion of censure "confirmed his reputation as the Opposition's best parliamentary debater in a generation". In the recent contest of policy speeches, John Howard off-the-cuff was less funereal than Paul Keating doggedly reading a script. Mr Howard the campaigner appeared so determined to come across as an unexceptionably decent ordinary Australian that it was hard to imagine his demeanour in the highest office. "Before a friendly assembly", Gideon Haigh recalls of a speech some years ago, "Howard showed a grace and sardonic wit of which I'd never suspected him". Will those qualities return to his speech when he has a friendly majority behind him in parliament?

Women and Men

Few of the women in parliament are yet senior enough to be employing speechwriters. Some of those who do so engage men, and that makes it harder to know whether the parliamentary speech of women has any distinct characteristics.

The first women entered the federal parliament in 1943, one in the House, one in the Senate, an event about which our consciousness was raised in this Parliament House during the jubilee year, 1993, by the enlightening

exhibition "Trust the Women" and the accompanying book of that title by the exhibition's curator Ann Millar.

John Curtin, having addressed the electors as Men and Women of Australia, now said in the House: "We do not any longer sit here as men". But he added that Enid Lyons did not sit in the house as a woman. Dorothy Tangney also said that in the Senate. Enid Lyons, widow and mother of eleven, told the men they would "have to become accustomed to the application of the homely metaphors of the kitchen rather than those of the operating theatre, the work shop or farm". To begin with, she compared herself with a new broom. I wonder whether the parliamentary speech of women has been larded by metaphors from female life as their numbers in the federal parliament increased by fits and starts from that two to the 32 of 1995. "I have no sex in this position", Senator Ruth Coleman memorably remarked when chairing the Senate in committee. Do women members of parliament differ in verbal style from men? And has the presence of women affected male speakers' language? The questions cry out for answers from Pam Peters and her computer, and she does give us a tantalizing glimpse in her paper on speech in the two houses. The greater representation of women in the Senate - 20%, compared with 5% in the House - is reflected in more frequent references to women, and more use of feminine pronouns and other gender-specific words. She finds "There is a touch of affirmative action in the greater use of *chairperson* in the Senate, as opposed to *chairman* in data from the House of Representatives. Similarly, the Senate provided examples of *spokesperson*, alongside *spokesman*, where the House of Representatives had only *spokesman*." This was in 1986; things may or may not have changed.

Are the women less prone to use unparliamentary language? Again, we lack quantitative data. The most recent Speaker, Stephen Martin, thinks women are no more genteel than men in his chamber. In the Senate Bronwyn Bishop demonstrated to us that ferocity is not gender-specific. The Democrat Senator Vicki Bourne does report a difference. During one debate, she recalls: "They started yelling at me". Unable to get a word in, she eventually began shouting back. "They shut up. I started off with the conciliatory approach and was treated with utter contempt. When I reverted to the aggressive male style, I was treated with respect."

The Speaker's welcome to Enid Lyons in 1943 was patronizing. "I ... will give her any assistance that such a rough diamond of the male sex as myself may be able to give her". And that was to the widow and political partner

of a Prime Minister! Times have changed. Senator Amanda Vanstone said in 1986: "The 'Mrs Rinso' image is out and the 'I mean business' image is in". But Kathy Martin Sullivan testified in 1993, after twelve years in the Senate and the House, that when a women speaks in parliament, most of the men "close their ears believing that they are about to hear fringe-feminist rhetoric which is to be automatically rejected".

An Institution in Decline?

But maybe most members of either gender close their ears most of the time. The almost totally unreported speeches of backbenchers are for the most part boring even to the speaker themselves. Here is Barry Jones, sitting on the backbench after serving as a minister: "the use of prepared speeches has largely destroyed the long tradition of debate. Typically, there are Whips' lists of speaker prepared for the presiding officer, so that a Member knows that he will be 'on' at 3.20 or 3.40 or 4.00. The Member generally stays in his office until a few minutes before the due time, comes into a deserted House, opens his manila folder and starts to read, without any reference to what has been said before him and what may well be said after".

This is not cheering testimony. Is parliamentary speech an institution in decline? As always, we should beware of inventing a mythical golden age. The decline of parliament has been proclaimed in both motherland and dominions for a long time. It's more than half a century since R G Menzies lamented "a sad falling-off in manners" and a scarcity of true debaters. I wonder what he would say of 1996. He revelled in question time. Of Paul Keating, Alan Ramsay has written that he rearranged question time because he thought parliament was largely a waste of time. Mr Keating described question time as "a courtesy extended to the House by the executive branch of government". He famously referred to the Senate as "unrepresentative swill". How far all this was personal to Mr Keating, how far representing a trend, will be easier to judge when we can compare him with successors. What's beyond dispute is the increasing presence of the executive in relation to the legislature. It's evident in architecture as well as speech. The Palace of Westminster is a parliament, occupied by the Commons and the Lords, with ministers having their offices elsewhere. Canberra's palace is one-third public gallery, one-third legislature, and one-third executive block, so designed as to prevent the public from being aware of the executive presence. For most of the time parliament met in Melbourne the executive had only one room, in which sometimes the Prime Minister and his colleagues cooked chops. In Canberra, the provisional parliament down the hill had

accommodation for Prime Minister and Leader of Government in the Senate, seven single rooms for ministers, and a Cabinet room for emergency meetings. Cabinet met for the first few years in West Block, but then moved into Parliament House, and ministers got into the habit of spending more time in parliamentary offices than in their departments. The magnificent new building has been described as a White House built inside the Capitol, a 10 Downing Street in the Palace of Westminster. Am I wandering from the subject of parliamentary speech? I trust not. The building itself, one of its few public critics has said, encourages a presidential style. Labor invited us to see the central issue of the 1996 election as Leadership. The relative value Paul Keating attributed to speech made inside and outside parliament may be gauged by looking at *Advancing Australia. The Speeches of Paul Keating, Prime Minister*, which includes four speeches made in parliament and fifty elsewhere. If and when John Howard publishes a volume chosen from his speeches as Prime Minister, it will be instructive to see how many of them are parliamentary.