

## **Parliamentary Speech\***

*Professor Ken Inglis*

‘Men and women of Australia’. The words are Gough Whitlam’s, beginning, at Bankstown in 1972, the policy speech in his victorious campaign for election. They are also John Curtin’s, campaigning in 1943 for re-election. Before that, on 8 December 1941, John Curtin said:

Men and women of Australia. We are at war with Japan.

It is less well known that 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 and they heard Curtin’s and Menzies’s words on the radio. Indeed, only by television and radio could a political leader address the whole nation at once, though in the 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 did not actually use the phrase ‘men and women of Australia’, but he did address in that speech both ‘the men of Australia’ and ‘the women of Australia’. That was the first time a party leader would think of speaking to the women, for women had been given the vote for the Federal Parliament in the previous year.

The Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition can never use that form of address in Parliament. In this building, he is supposed to address only the Chair, which is Mr Speaker in the House of Representatives and Mr President in the Senate and, from 1986 to 1989, was Madam Speaker.<sup>1</sup> Members are not here delivering addresses, as on the hustings; they are

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\* This paper was presented by Professor Inglis as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 23 February 1996. Professor Inglis is Emeritus Professor, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.

<sup>1</sup> In August 1996 Senator the Hon. Margaret Reid became the first woman President of the Senate.

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engaged in debates. Today I am interpreting my brief narrowly, saying little about the words politicians speak outside Parliament when they address the men and women of Australia, or the electors of Woop Woop, or red-eyed listeners at a \$100 per plate breakfast. Though no clock is actually signalling how much time I have, as in the House and the Senate, I have been given a limit.

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

Just about every word spoken in the Commonwealth Parliament over almost one hundred 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. The reports are said to be 'verbatim', but they have never been quite that. The founder of the Victorian state *Hansard*, or the colonial *Hansard* as it was known, 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 records by direction of the President and Speaker. Clumsy diction is made neater, and 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. Gavin Souter, historian of the Commonwealth Parliament, judges that '*Hansard*'s accuracy as a full transcript of words actually uttered was always open to some doubts.'

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 had not actually made, the Speaker ruled that 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 for the Hunter district was speaking on the Chifley government's, as it turned out, fatal bill to nationalise banking. He paused to send this message to his dentist in Sydney:

Milton, get my teeth ready this weekend, if you're listening. It's a cheap way of sending a telegram.

Whether or not Milton was listening, reporters in the press gallery were, and it was news the next morning. But it is 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 Rowley 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 am not sure whether he meant 'should of', 'bloody' or both. I will return to that theme in a moment.

*Hansard* is all the more valuable as a record of parliamentary speech in our time because newspapers report so much less of it than they did one hundred, fifty or even twenty years ago. Apart from exchanges at question time, even the wordiest of our papers now report little of what is 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 when the voice heard most is the reporter's, paraphrasing, analysing or even deriding what the Member is saying. Except for a short sound-bite permitted to the speaker, we just see his or her mouth moving in a manner the victims have labelled 'goldfishing'.

*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 and permitting newspapers to publish what is said in Parliament with similar impunity. Even if Members should want to divest themselves of the privilege of free speech, they cannot. 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, who was 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.' The reports differed.) 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 to be suspended three times in one session, and who at the time of his third suspension was just out of gaol, 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 were reminded or discovered when, prior to the 1996 election, a judge 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, whom 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.

There are two limits to the freedom of parliamentary speech. First, Members cannot 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 Opposition, had spoken for 12 hours and 40 minutes, from 10.03 p.m. on 13 November 1918 until 10.43 a.m. the next day. He probably would have spoken longer had he been allowed to sit down—he weighed 18 stone, and that was a difficult weight to carry for all those hours. But the President ruled that he must remain standing—a kind of standing order, you might say. Senator Gardiner actually had a good tactical reason for making that speech, but his colleagues decided that enough was enough.

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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, from 1950, the minister introducing a bill could have 45 minutes instead of an hour, speeches on a second reading would last only 30 minutes instead of 45, speeches on the adjournment would be 10 minutes instead of 15, and no confidence motion and address-in-reply speeches would be 25 minutes instead of 35. The guillotine could make speeches shorter at any time the party with a majority in a House wanted, and parties in opposition have consistently complained that governments use that device to curtail unwanted speech.

Not every Member has needed the time limit or the guillotine. J.K. McDougall, the Labor Member for Wannon from 1906 to 1913, was named for good reason the silent Member. When W.M. Jack, the 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, 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—and splendid speeches they both were. No standing order had impeded these Members' right to free speech; they simply had 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. 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 Frank Devine, 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 forty-eight. 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 fifteen each.

The language of that Senator from Western Australia prompts me to be cautious 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 a good deal of 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, a linguist at Macquarie University, has done a computer analysis of 650,000 words, spoken over four days in the two Houses during March 1986. Her paper entitled 'Debate in the Upper and Lower House' is a fine demonstration of the yield to be won by bringing new technology to bear on the riches lying in those vast volumes of *Hansard*.<sup>2</sup> Mrs Peters detects a difference in styles of abuse, which she 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.' Mrs Peters sees this difference in the idioms of abuse 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 is not, I think, 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, who both came 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 Paul Keating's mouth. 'Jobs, work and kids, they're four letter words to Mr Keating,' says the text. Two of his nouns attracting most attention have nine letters and seven letters: '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 appeared on television in 1981. So these 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 is 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, he taunts 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. 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 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.

<sup>2</sup> Pam Peters, 'Debate in the Upper and Lower House' in Pam Peters (ed.), *The National Language: Proceedings of Style Council 94*, Dictionary Research Centre, Macquarie University, NSW, 1994, pp. 51–58.

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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?’

Maybe, and up to a point, they were saying that. Perhaps Labor men’s abuse, in and out of Parliament, was 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 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 having served in the Great War. *Hansard* records an interjection not from Menzies’ and Page’s side of the House but from 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 the subject of who went and who did not 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 do not. I wonder how the following impressions would stand up to such systematic research. Here are four themes which I notice recurring in parliamentary abuse.

The first theme is that 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”’, the historian himself swept up in this animal imagery; while in the House, ‘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. He once said his opponents were like ‘dogs returning to their vomit’. Dr Hewson was ‘a dog with a belly full of piss’.

‘Cur’ and ‘Kerr’ became a pun popular among 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 for good measure that Senator Gair was a toad. Ordered to moderate his language, Senator O’Byrne changed ‘toad’ to ‘bullfrog’, saying, ‘Ninety per cent frog—and 10 per cent bull.’ ‘Skunk’ has also enjoyed long popularity, combining, as it does, animality and stench. ‘You dirty skunks’, said a Member in 1910. ‘Rat’, another popular word, also connects animality with dirt and, in Labor parlance, with treachery as well—all in three letters!

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 its source to its 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*, Billy Snedden chose to make a pun on the word ‘sua’.

The most civilised 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 is moral deficiency. Opponents tell lies. They are cowards: ‘Never has a Prime Minister evinced such cowardly disgraceful behaviour,’ said Reg Withers of Gough Whitlam on 15 October 1975 as the Opposition moves in for the kill. One aspect 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’s first appearance in our parliamentary rhetoric. When Alfred 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, he said, ‘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 is 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, inspecting the list of senatorial insults collected by Amanda Vanstone, counts four ‘idiots’, two ‘dopeys’, four ‘sillies’, two ‘morons’ and a ‘dolt’, and concludes that Senators seem to regard lack of intelligence as the

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most contemptible flaw. Whether that would be so of Members of the House remains to be investigated.

Presiding officers are routinely accused of giving Members of their own party more licence in the use of offensive language, and the introduction of a neutral Speaker is suggested from time to time as a means of even-handedly reducing abuse. The federal coalition committed itself to such a reform in 1992, but I do not think it has been mentioned lately.

It is 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 is an institution peculiar to parliamentary democracy. The President in a congressional system does not 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 often 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 that 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.’ Peter Cole-Adams from the *Canberra Times* says it is ‘a test of strength and nerve, a sort of virility ritual’. 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.

Who have been our best parliamentary speakers? The question is unanswerable but irresistible. How do we judge them? By performance in the bearpit of question time, or in the usually more tranquil passages of debate on motions? Unless we have 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*? How do we imagine their voices and their bodies? In judging past speakers, we have to pretty much rely on what contemporaries thought of them. In 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' judgements in 1945, written candidly to a son, of his principal opponents in Parliament. He says:

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.

Menzies was a bit more respectful towards 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 for Menzies being forensic. Curtin had been brought up not to speak in law courts, as Menzies was, but at public meetings where your voice had to hit the back of the hall. You can see and hear that in newsreels.

But, 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 when it comes to Parliament I truly consider that Menzies is not only the best debater I have heard, but in my judgment the greatest who ever lived. And I have read Burke, Cicero, Randolph Churchill, 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, when he said:

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 was on a ceremonial occasion rather than in debate. It was John Howard at the opening of this building by the Queen in 1988. He did not mention Gough Whitlam.

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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,' Professor La Nauze wrote, 'still remain among the most slovenly public speakers in the world'. If that is 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 woman, who would 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 did not translate, so I won't.

Arrogance is a quality ascribed to Mr Whitlam, to Mr Menzies and 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'. Graham Freudenberg was not a disinterested listener to that speech—he wrote it—but he was not the only one to feel that about the meeting.

In retirement, Menzies said, 'I never employed a speech-writer myself . . . I had an obstinate objection to having other people's words put into my mouth'. He is 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 that he never employed a speech writer. That is a novelty which came to Australia from the USA in the 1960s.

Graham Freudenberg first wrote for Calwell, then for Whitlam. Don Watson writes for Paul Keating, and observed recently that Menzies had a great deal more time to write his speeches than contemporary prime ministers. 'These days,' Watson remarked, 'he could no more do it all alone than they could take a boat to a London conference'. Sometimes Paul Keating's words are 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, but they are rarely alone in the kitchen.

Reporters commonly praise Watson's text and deplore Keating's leaden delivery of it. Where gravity is what is 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 it is not the required tone. He can mumble through a fine script, and then, answering questions off the cuff, shine and sparkle. When he read a speech in Parliament, the listener—the spectator—always sensed the possibility that Mr Keating would raise his eyes from the script and let fly.

We do not hear of any partnership on the other side of Parliament quite like Freudenberg's with Whitlam or Watson's with Keating. I mentioned John Howard as the one parliamentarian who made a speech that Sir Paul Hasluck remembered. Mr Howard rarely **reads** a whole speech. When he resumed the Leader's chair in the House in 1995, 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. At the moment (February 1996) Mr Howard appears so determined to come across as an unexceptionably decent, ordinary Australian that it is hard to imagine his demeanour if he wins. ‘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 if and when he has a friendly majority behind him in Parliament?

Few of the women in Parliament are yet senior enough to be employing speech writers. 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 and one in the Senate—an event about which our consciousness was raised right here in 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, said in the House in 1943, ‘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 that year. Enid Lyons, however, a widow and mother of eleven, told the men that 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’. (What nicely chosen occupations.) To begin with, she compared herself to 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 have increased by fits and starts from two to the present thirty-two. ‘I don’t have any sex when I am 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? 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 tantalising glimpse in her paper on speech in the two Houses.

The greater representation of women in the Senate—20 per cent compared with five per cent in the House in 1986—is reflected in more frequent references to women, and more use of feminine pronouns and other gender-specific words. Pam Peters 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*.

That 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

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Chamber. In the Senate, Bronwyn Bishop has reminded us that ferocity is not gender-specific. The Democrat Senator Vicki Bourne, however, does report a difference. During one debate, she recalled, '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 patronising. He said, '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 woman 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'. 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 speakers themselves. Barry Jones, once, but no longer, a minister, said:

The use of prepared speeches has largely destroyed the long tradition of debate. Typically, there are Whips' lists of speakers 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 is 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 said that he rearranged question time because he thinks Parliament is largely a waste of time. Mr Keating has described question time as 'a courtesy extended to the House by the executive branch of government'. He has famously referred to the Senate as 'unrepresentative swill'. How far all this is personal to Mr Keating, how far representing a trend, may be easier to judge at a later date.

What is beyond dispute is the increasing presence of the executive in relation to the legislature. It is evident in architecture as well as in speech. The Palace of Westminster is a Parliament, occupied by the Commons and the Lords, with ministers having their offices elsewhere. This 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 the Prime Minister and his colleagues would sometimes cook chops. In Canberra, the provisional Parliament House 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 two 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. That is the main reason why the building became too small.

This magnificent 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. We are being asked to believe that this election is about leadership. The relative value Paul Keating attributes to speech inside and outside Parliament may be gauged by looking at the recent collection entitled *Advancing Australia: The Speeches of Paul Keating, Prime Minister*, which includes four speeches made in Parliament and fifty speeches made elsewhere.

It is time for me to stop before I am gagged or guillotined. But I have one last word about speeches in this building. I wonder whether Parliament House will be host in a few weeks to the sports psychologist who was invited in after the last election to speak to 90-odd former Members and Senators about the trauma of losing.

**Questioner** — Other people's hesitation has tempted me to remind us of Socrates. Right back then we were being encouraged to know enough to ask intelligent questions. I think there are many people in the community today, which I consider a sick society, who do want some good repair work and better samples up here in this beautiful building. I want to remind people of something that a rabbi in Melbourne mentioned, which I remember all the time: to call for a leader is to give the victory to Hitler.

**Questioner** — Professor Inglis, you have mentioned quite a number of debates and speeches in your address. You have passed some comment upon how good you thought some of them were and have quoted other people's thoughts on how good they were. Do you have any favourite speeches?

**Professor Inglis** — I cannot think of a particular speech by Alfred Deakin, but there are some speeches of his that are a joy to read as examples of the arts of rhetoric. The first generation of federal parliamentarians were familiar with what Cicero and Demosthenes had written about oratory. They were engaging in oratory. I do find a kind of pleasure one could not hope to find now. Some of the best of those were in the early days.

One in recent times—perhaps it was in the top of my mind because I looked at it again for today's lecture—is that speech of John Curtin's at the time of the Coral Sea battle. I would just say amen to the reporter's every word. It was Alan Reid who made that description of it. I thought that was as fine a speech as Alan Reid did. I would have to think further on that to get a full answer, but thank you for the question.

**Questioner** — Professor Inglis, I have a question about New South Wales in the vernacular. You isolated those from New South Wales as being different. Did you come to a conclusion as to why you thought they were so different?

**Professor Inglis** — The traditional view which, on the whole, I was endorsing was that there has always been a peculiar roughness and tumbling about the politics of New South Wales. There appear to have been more ruffians in New South Wales Parliament than in the Parliament

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of your home state of South Australia or the Parliament of my home state of Victoria as far as I know. How far this perception is mere genteel southern prejudice, I do not know.

**Questioner** — I wonder whether you think there has been any change in recent years due to the fact that people now largely ignore, in both Houses, the convention of addressing the Chair you spoke of?

**Professor Inglis** — I should think so. There must be people here who know more than I do about it. There was a letter in the *Canberra Times* recently from Robert Langdon, a scholar who had spent a long time as a parliamentary reporter. He said that he thought abuse would lose a lot of its power if people were not able to say, ‘You are the filthiest thing that ever came in,’ but instead had to say, ‘Mr Speaker, he is the filthiest thing that ever came in. He is a yahoo.’ I imagine that being required to address the Chair has a certain moderating influence, a reminder that what is being engaged in is debate.

**Questioner** — I wonder whether you have any comment on the old Member for East Sydney, Eddie Ward, because he comes up quite often in the histories?

**Professor Inglis** — Yes, indeed. He is one of the people who comes to mind in associating New South Wales with a really salty parliamentary idiom. He and Jack Lang—to pluck another name out of the air—probably had richer lexicons of abuse than anybody else in the House. I do not know that I brought out how cleverly abuse can be used and how witty it can be. Eddie Ward was a clever wit and used his profanity and vulgarity with great care and skill—not always for abuse.

There is a kind of clever comedy to Eddie Ward. His outgoing remark, not in the House but I think it was in the last Caucus meeting, was, ‘All I want to be remembered as is someone that everybody loved.’

**Questioner** — My question is somewhat similar to the previous one. What have been the most memorable interjections?

**Professor Inglis** — I do not know. I have mentioned a few. Off the cuff I cannot think. There is the problem that unless the Member on his or her feet responds to the interjection it does not get into *Hansard*. You, having worked in the old House, may well know remarks that were made at interjections that I have never heard of.

If I could go back to a previous question, people used to say that the convict heritage had something to do with New South Wales’s salty language. The first speech in the House of Representatives in 1901 was made by someone who had come to Australia as a convict. Isn’t that a nice piece of history? Mr Groom, the Member for Darling Downs, had arrived as a convict in the 1840s, was the oldest Member of the House when it opened in 1901 and made the first speech with, of course, no reference to how he had come to Australia, and died a few weeks later.

**Questioner** — I just have a comment on that New South Wales question, first of all. It is interesting that the New South Wales Parliament is often called the bearpit, just going back to that quality of tone emanating from New South Wales. Your comments on the differing styles of Paul Keating and John Howard are interesting. I was wondering whether you had any

comment on the relative qualities and differences of the speeches the two men delivered on the subject of the Australian Republic in this Parliament—those two great set speech occasions when Keating delivered the government's statement and, I think the night after, John Howard presented the reply. I think they demonstrate some interesting differences.

**Professor Inglis** — I have to say—and this is part of the problem, isn't it, of knowing about parliamentary speeches—that I did not hear either of them. I have looked at the text of Mr Keating's speeches in that collection of speeches, but I have not seen—but I will look at—the text of Mr Howard's. The sheer volume of speeches and the paucity of reporting can make it very hard. What did you think? Did you hear them both or have you read them both?

**Questioner** — I heard them both and John Howard's was, in fact, delivered apparently without notes. I thought on the occasion Keating, because he deeply believed in the subject, probably presented the finer speech. But that is an observation.

**Professor Inglis** — Was he reading?

**Questioner** — Both reading and off the cuff.

**Questioner** — The cold printed record of the speech or interview can sometimes be misleading. I wondered whether, in your research, you make much use of the audiovisual record which is kept of speech making in the Parliament, perhaps capturing some of the flavour and the personality. I am thinking, for instance, that Bob Hawke often spoke in the style in which he used to harangue an ACTU congress or Tim Fischer still seems often to be addressing the troops.

**Professor Ken Inglis** — Nice point. I do want to make use of audiovisual records. In the book I am working towards about speeches in Australian history, I hope that there will be an accompanying CD. The technology being as it is, who knows, there may be visual bits too. There is some interest from the ABC in collaborating with me on that. The ABC sound archives have superbly indexed tape records—a computer index—so you can find your way within speeches to all sorts of things.

I wonder whether Bob Hawke would have been wiser to employ a speech writer more than he did and stick closer than he did, when he did have a speech writer, to the text that he had been given. I think he was still being affected by the style of advocacy which he had developed before industrial tribunals, which were prepared to listen all day to what anyone said. It is no accident, I think, that the one Prime Minister about whose speech a word has been coined is Bob Hawke—Hawkespeak.

**Questioner** — I have two points. The first is that you have not said anything about speed of delivery, and that is obviously something that was difficult in the past. But I certainly remember, as many will here, the speed at which Les Haylen, Eddie Ward or, of course, Fred Daly spoke. I do not know whether that shows up in the sanitised *Hansard* reports anymore. The second question—a bit more serious—is: how important do you think it is or was then and now that a leader be able to speak well and to have a commanding presence in the House? I am remembering the fact that in the 1960s Harold Holt was not able to give two speeches on the one day. He was wiped out by his speech on the VIP aircraft issue and could not speak on

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Vietnam. There was a tremendous sense that he really dropped the ball and it mattered. I do not know whether it would matter so much now.

**Professor Inglis** — I wonder. I think it still matters. The first question is the best possible example of how reading *Hansard* gives you no idea about delivery. How would you know? You might be able to work it out. Yes, the time of starting is given and the time the next speaker starts is given, so you could work out how many words a minute were spoken. The other thing would be for the poor *Hansard* reporters to testify.

I think the ability to speak compellingly in the House is important. I have just thought of one example in reply to a previous question. Probably the most fatal interjection ever made in recent times was when Mr Snedden, trying to imitate that slightly airy, fluffy diction of Mr Whitlam said, ‘Woof, woof.’ The disappearance of Mr Snedden can be dated from that moment, I think.

**Note: The research material used in this speech was gathered by Professor Inglis as part of his work in progress for a forthcoming book on speeches in Australian history.**