

On Political Scepticism

Several years ago Andrew Marr, the BBC's chief political correspondent and once editor of the Independent, reviewed a book called "New Labour, New Language". The book is a study of New Labour's use of political rhetoric and spin. Marr was concerned to play down the significance of Labour's reliance on spin. In the course of his review, he made a quite remarkable statement:

As to Blair himself, however, the charge of insincerity is meaningless. I don't believe that there is a gap between Blair the politician and some other, 'real' Blair, watching himself with sardonic amusement. Life isn't like that. He would be unable to function if he did not believe in his own integrity. He has strong values and would, I think, crack up if he felt he was acting a cynical role.

This is somewhat odd in the way it replies to a charge that hasn't been made – nowhere in the book is the question of Blair's sincerity raised. But the really remarkable thing is Marr's unquestioning and simplistic use (to the point of disingenuousness) of the idea of sincerity. For it should be crystal clear that sincerity is a quality which is altogether irrelevant to political matters. Being sincere or insincere has no bearing on the rights or wrongs of a politician's behaviour. There is no doubt at all that on some issues Hitler was fully sincere, despite at the same time being thoroughly cynical as a demagogue. At an early Nazi party meeting in 1923, he shouted over and over again: "Propaganda, propaganda, all that matters is propaganda!" Yet it would be meaningless to accuse Hitler of being insincere in his wish to exterminate the Jews. Mrs Thatcher too was without doubt passionately sincere in her political programme. For all we know, Bush may even be sincere in his Axis of Evil talk.

The reason why the question of sincerity is neither here nor there is simple. Human capacity for self-deception is bottomless and on top of this conviction breeds conviction, which means that the most effective politicians are precisely those who are most convinced by their own line. Nietzsche made the point a long time ago:

Men believe in the truth of all that is seen to be strongly believed. In all great deceivers a remarkable process is at work to which they owe their power. In the very act of deception with all its preparations—the dreadful voice, the expression, the gestures—they are overcome by their belief in themselves, and it is this belief which then speaks so persuasively, so miracle-like to the audience. Not only does he communicate that to the audience but the audience returns it to him and strengthens his belief.

Of course Blair is sincere! This is the central problem with Blair. He is too sincere, almost impossibly sincere. Blair can muster a heartfelt impression of sincerity at the drop of a hat, and be seen to be utterly sincere in his sincerity. No one does sincerity so well as Blair. The suspicion grows that Blair's political persona consists of nothing more than the marks and gestures of sincerity.

But in this respect Blair is no different from any other politician, or at least not different in kind. Politics is all about giving the impression of conviction. Blair's talent is his exceptional flair for doing the sincerity thing. Integrity is his special

More to the point, you can say a politician is a liar, is all wrong, and mean it – but will you say the same thing about a politician on your own side? It's no good just being able to say it about a politician whose policies you believe are not yours, you must say it and mean it about all politicians. Not of course that politicians should be toppled, someone has got to do some of it. It is just that they should be a little less arrogant, I mean a lot less. Perhaps we shouldn't have to see so much of them, they should keep a very low profile.

From where do politicians draw their false authority? From the idea that ideas are abstractions, are reflections, have no substance (as most of what passes for thought today does indeed have no substance). Who underwrites the idea that ideas are abstractions? In whose interest is it to insist that ideas are abstractions? Who, at bottom, has got most to lose by acknowledging that what he claims from logic is not paid for? Who maintains his authority by falsely claiming the authority of Reason? Who presents the face of Reason? Who legislates on Reason? Who authorises the ideas of politicians (who manifestly have no true ideas)? Answer: the philosopher in one form or another, the thinker, the theorist.

But doesn't that mean we can't speak out against tyranny? Why? We can't speak out anyway. We can't speak. But if you can see through a politician's authority, he won't be able to tyrannise you.

Put a bandanna around a young man's head and call him a freedom fighter. But if he and other young men want to work off their excessive hormonal energy let them do without me. Let them lock antlers elsewhere. Good luck to them.

Put a man in a suit behind a microphone, let him step down to the tarmac from an aeroplane, and call him a world leader. Fine. Now when another man in a suit who is as plain as plain can be a butcher steps down to the tarmac, why can't you say what he is? Because they are all cut from the same cloth. No, that would be unfair. Because they are all playing by the same rules – and to say out loud what everyone knows would give the game away.

Simon Beesley
email: simonbeesley@clara.co.uk