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AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

COMMUNITY AID ABROAD

OXFAM, AUSTRALIA

WORLD'S MOST BORING LECTURE COMPETITION

FRIDAY, 6 OCTOBER 2000

BORING SPEECHES - THE TEN DEADLY SINS

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Michael Kirby*

I am in danger of becoming obsessed with the figure ten. This problem obviously goes back to my childhood and the Ten Commandments. In recent times I have given speeches on the "Ten Lessons of Appellate Advocacy", "Ten principles of the Human Genome". "Ten Lessons from the Republic Referendum". Now I want to add Ten Deadly Sins of Boring Public Speeches. Nine or eleven would not do. Ten is in danger of becoming a boring number.

In over a quarter of a century in public life I have seen all of the sins I will recount. I have listened to some awfully boring speeches. Indeed, come to think of it, I have given a few myself. I

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accept that I am a perfect expert to be the judge of the World's Most Boring Lecture Competition.

I received the invitation to perform the task at a most embarrassing moment. I had been invited to give a talk at the University of Nebraska. Just as my hosts were welcoming me as their international speaker, a facsimile was handed, one to the other, and eventually to me, inviting me to fulfil this role. I could see the look of horror on the faces of those who noticed the words "Boring Speaker" in the invitation. I did not disappoint my Nebraskan friends. I will leave it to you to unravel that ambiguity.

What makes a truly boring public speech? Ten skills can be deployed. Alas, on exquisite occasions, all of them are present in ghastly combination.

1. A boring topic

No matter how brilliant the speaker may be, there are some topics that it is just impossible to make interesting. Even Shakespeare's Mark Anthony would fail to breathe life into them. Some of the topics that, in the past, have won the World's Most Boring Lecture Competition illustrate this first sin. Take for example:

- Marxist interpretations of a joke about bananas;
- The epistemological differences of left from right;

- A post-structuralist analysis of John Laws's poetry (with translations into Hindi); and
- The binomial theorem in nineteenth century France.

If one hangs around long enough in the public speaking circuit, one can accomplish much and quite easily fall into the first sin. My best known effort in this respect - reproduced in countless corners of the Internet - was my well known talk, delivered to an astonished audience in Harare, Zimbabwe on "Breast Milk Substitutes and the Law". It caused my then colleague, Gordon Samuels, to ask on my return: "Kirby, is there nothing you will not speak about?" After that jest he was naturally elevated to Vice Regal rank whose function specialises in this first sin.

But at least breast milk substitutes was enlivened by occasional references to breasts. It is almost impossible to give a talk on a sexual theme and to make it boring. Yet some have succeeded. One past winner of this competition (from the National Centre for Development Studies) addressed the theme:

- The stocaschist linkages between sexual abstinence and skiing injuries in south-east Asia.

Two of the teams in the competition in 2000 should give up at once. There is no way that they will commit the first sin. I refer to:

- Stanley Gibbons' Philatelists' Guide to Hot Steamy, Sticky Sex (Environment Australia); and
- To the Beat of a Different Drum: Subversive Sexualities in the Timpony Part of Beethoven's Symphony No 3 in E Flat (Eroica) (ANU School of Music).

The themes of these talks are so potentially riveting that I see little prospect of boredom there. Sex sells. It also fills public lecture halls.

2. Boring length

It was Voltaire, in his *Discourse on Man*, who declared that "the secret of being a bore ... is to tell everything". To share, for example, everything one knows about public service travel expenditure or non-linear guitar planning errors, promises much in the boredom department. The tiniest talk on such topics would be excruciating. Boredom demands detail.

There are some public speakers, many of them politicians and some judges, who are accomplished experts in this second sin. Fidel Castro can speak for hours, without drawing breath. In the old days of the Soviet Union, the speeches of members of the Politbureau were faithfully recorded in all their magnificent duration. The only relief arose from interruptions, recorded as "applause", "prolonged applause" and "thunderous prolonged applause". The last mentioned

interruption was a sure sign of enveloping boredom. Physical activity such as leaping to one's feet and moving arms and hands together in frenzied motion, can be a safe, but temporary, way of keeping awake.

Boring length is not at all difficult for many public speakers. Some sportsmen ruin everything by unseemly brevity. Winston Churchill, invited to return to Harrow, his old school, was asked at the last minute to say something to the boys. He rose and all that he said was: "Never give up. Never give up. Never give up". This said it all. But it could have been eked out for several hours, if he had only had a heart.

3. Boring jokes

There is a modern tendency, derived from American folksiness, to attempt to enliven every speech with a joke at beginning and end. This is much to be applauded for the jokes invariably fall flat. They cause intense embarrassment and result in the audience switching off. The outcome is intense boredom. The joke, for this purpose, must never be integrated into the theme of the public speaker's talk. It must have as little relevance to its subject matter as is humanly possible. Preferably, it must be studied and carefully rehearsed. Like George W Bush's response to Mr Al Gore's statistics: "He not only invented the Internet. He must have invented the calculator". Spin is full of such jokes.

There are plenty of humour about boredom itself. Most of it is suitably boring.

- Herbert Beerbohn Tree reportedly described a friend as "An old bore. Even the grave yawns for him";
- John Updike wrote an essay which he modestly called "Confessions of a Wild Bore". In it he declared that "a healthy male adult bore consumes each year one and a half times his own weight in other people's patience".
- Oscar Wilde, who should have known, declared in *A Woman of No Importance* that to be in society was "merely a bore". But to be out of it was "simply a tragedy".

I could go on with jokes of this kind. But I will refrain from doing so. A boring public speaker must never use humour to telling effect. Mr Bob Hawke, sometimes an expert on these themes, broke the third rule in the 1983 Australian federal elections. His riposte to Malcolm Fraser was truly witty. The people could not put their money under the bed, he said, as Mr Fraser had warned the public under a Labor Government would do. That was where, according to Mr Fraser's party, the Reds were! The electors laughed all the way to the ballot box. Malcolm Fraser was political history.

4. Boring confusion

The greatest skill of the boring speaker is to have no structure to the speech. No concept whatever of what is to be said. A meandering diatribe of undigested thoughts, stumbling around in search of a theme.

It is interesting to be part of a glazed eye audience watching as such a speaker ambles to a much prayed-for ending. Waiting for that magic word, "Finally". Wondering where on earth the talk is going. Fearing that it is irretrievably lost in dense undergrowth. Hoping against hope that the agony will soon be over. Even more interesting is the fate of looking at an audience as they exhibit these emotions - and wondering to one's self when (if at all) one's speech will be over.

Judges are expert in this sin. They receive daily instruction in it from highly paid barristers. It is not only James Joyce who practised the technique of stream of consciousness communication. Many public speakers whom I have heard are accomplished in that *genre*. To announce concisely the objectives of a speech is an anathema to them. To display a structure - beginning, middle and end - is alien to their nature. Those spoilsports who do so have no chance of committing the fourth sin.

5. Boring language

In multicultural Australia, we see creeping into public discourse a feature that has long been well known in Canada. The Canadian public speaker is always expected to interrupt every speech and, in execrable French, to stumble through a few token sentences to display a dubious empathy to the language of a resentful minority.

Australia has a finely developed sense of foreign languages. It has been demonstrated over the years on the High Court. In the earliest days, the Court upheld and enforced as lawful the dictation test which was administered to unwanted foreigners seeking to enter this country. It was an amusing idea to subject an unwanted visitor from Czechoslovakia to a dictation test in the forgotten Gaelic tongue of long dead Scots. What a joyful occasion that must have been for the bureaucrat concerned. The dropping of the dictation test took a lot of fun out of the lives of immigration officials.

Sir Owen Dixon's idea of amusing discourse was to pass a note in classical Greek to his colleague, Justice Fullagar, also practised in that tongue. Fullagar would cackle in uproarious laughter - an indication that Dixon had failed the boredom test. But Sir Dudley Williams who sat between them was stony faced and unamused. He had some Latin but no Greek. So perhaps Chief Justice Dixon's jests qualified for the fifth sin.

Recent studies of why the German people enjoy a tendency to melancholia have begun to concentrate on their language. How would you like to spend a lifetime contorting face and tongue into the peculiarities of the Umlaut? Physiologists and psychologists blame a lot on the Umlaut. Anyone in doubt should attend a conference of public speakers in Germany. Some languages are joyous and playful, as Italian seems to be. English with its hisses and th's and sylabet sounds, so difficult for envious foreigners, happily portrays much of its Germanic origins. Little wonder that we often share Germanic melancholia and have now inflicted it, as the universal language, on the rest of the world.

6. Boring self-absorption

A splendid sin on the part of a public speaker is to be totally self-absorbed. To be so obsessed with the subject, and with one's own involvement in it, as to be completely indifferent to the sensibilities of the audience and their reactions to what one is saying.

Everyone has his or her little obsession. In Australia, it usually takes the form of a football or cricket team. But with a little luck it might involve the late symphonies of Gustav Mahler. The urgent needs of law reform. Or religious attitudes to homosexuality. With a little persistence, a public speaker with such obsessions is well on the way to a first class honours degree in boredom. To consider

that many find Mahler's music too noisy for too long; that some think the law bad enough without law reform; and that numerous people find sexuality a yawn, can come as a terrible shock to an accomplished bore. But fortunately, most people of this disposition are so impervious to their audience as never to notice. For them, the sixth deadly sin is regularly and joyfully committed.

7. Boring clichés

The surest sign of a pedestrian mind is a appeal to clichés. Contemporary clichés will almost certainly take the boring public speaker to the joys of the Olympics. To say predictable things is safe, comfortable and boring. To say challenging things is positively dangerous. To venture on the controversial, is strictly forbidden, especially in Australia. To arrest an audience with a truly original thought, founded on new information, is absolutely impermissible.

Public discourse in Australia is full of boring clichés. Sometimes they come in the form of political correctness. A drab hand of conformity has fallen on our nation. There is an intolerance of minority viewpoints. Those guilty of expressing them will be slapped down by journalistic scribes. Such speakers deserve such rebukes. They have forgotten the seventh deadly sin, beloved because so familiar to Australian audiences.

8. Boring delivery

The eighth sin is all too familiar. Let's face it, some people just have boring voices. Not everyone can have a melliferous, golden syrupe, fruity voice like my own. One's voice is probably all to do with nasal proportions, mouth structure and chest capacity. Like a concert singer, really. If God has not blessed you with these attributes, you cannot really be blamed that your voice drones and whines and bores your audience to distraction.

Those who really work at this sin can do wonders. It takes a special skill to speak for an hour or more at a single pitch and tone. Yet quite a few are highly accomplished at this art. It takes even more skill to avoid the slightest cadence; the pause that refreshes; the raising and lowering of volume. Some public speakers have made an artform of mumbling. Many regard microphones as things to be defied, to be left disengaged or to be totally ignored during delivery.

One particularly skilful way of securing top marks on this eighth sin is to read a speech written by others. I have only done it once. It was in my law reform days. It was an awful ordeal for me and for the audience. Unless a speech writer is familiar with the language and verbal patterns of a speaker, he or she can wreak havoc on the speaker's delivery. Pity the busy elected officials who necessity condemn: to spending a lifetime reading the ideas put into

their mouths by others. Never to look up from one's notes and never to engage the audience is a high ambition of boring public speakers. The art of deft repartee and spontaneous address in public life has fallen away in recent years. If you are in doubt, compare the early volumes of the *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* with those of today. In matters of substance, beyond the theatre of Question Time, spontaneity is all but totally missing. Is it just old age creeping on? Or did the parliamentary broadcasts seem more lively and substantive in the times of the never-boring Mr Speaker Archie Cameron, fifty years ago?

9. Boring inflexibility

Of course, I do not blame public speakers too much. Many of the sins which I have recounted, are now occasioned by the modern paraphernalia of public speaking. The blinding lights of television, turned on and off at all the wrong moments. Or turned off altogether when a truly witty and original speaker like oneself arrives to follow to the podium a worthy, but moth-eaten, predecessor.

It was not this way in the days of radio. Mr Menzies could get away with it then. He, like Churchill, had a command of pause. Radio is somehow more conducive to content than television is. Nowadays, if a public speaker pauses for effect, or to let an important idea sink in, he or she is likely to be zapped. The medium

is truly the message. It is designed for a very visual generation, with a low average IQ and an even lower attention span.

Imagery now is everything. The choice of the most important elected public official in the world, the United States President, turns less and less on the content of the candidates' public speeches. It turns more and more on a prolonged Rodin-like kiss, on folksy karaoke performances and on analysis of sighs, eye gestures and apparent personal charm. Al Gore goes down in the polls for sighing once too often and rolling his eyes. He possibly did this to keep himself awake. George W Bush goes up because he seems a nice kind of guy whom you would be prepared, reluctantly, to have to dinner. The fact that Mr Nice Guy signs more death warrants for prisoners in Texas than almost any head of government anywhere in the world is irrelevant in the new world, of public speaking. Increasingly, the message does not matter a jot. The ugly have no real place in elected office today. One of the least boring speakers of the century, F D Roosevelt, would have got nowhere today. There would have been no hiding that wheelchair; to say nothing of the lovers and the many endearing and human peccadillos.

Welcome to the world in which the new media nurtures new forms of boredom. The speaker who is bereft without his slides. The lecturer who always puts her transparencies upside down. The obdurate laptop that brings every international conference to a grinding halt because it simply refuses to deliver the visuals designed

to add dazzle and glitz to a speaker who, left alone, would commit every one of the foregoing sins.

10. Boring peoples' rights

I reach the last of the deadly sins. In fact, it is not a sin at all. It is a reminder that boring public speakers are members of a large and fast growing minority. They too are entitled to human rights. There is a human dignity in being ones boring self.

In all probability, as the Human Genome Project unfolds, it will be found that boredom is genetic. People simply cannot help it. Indeed, the gene probably manifests itself in two types: borers and borees. Almost certainly the crucial genes are found on the Y chromosome. Certainly, in my experience, they manifest themselves most commonly in the males of the species.

Some of those who yawn and fall asleep are not even reacting to one's cultivated witticisms and entrancing thoughts. They are simply physiological victims of sleep apnoea. All they need is to attach themselves to a machine. If they do not snore at night, they will not sleep through public addresses. Pity them. They are victims.

As for bores themselves, I can describe quite precisely the identikit of the typical exemplar of this art. He is male. Average

height. About 60. He wears a dark suit. A white shirt. A navy blue tie and glasses. He is tired. And bored. In fact, all in all, he looks rather like me.