

## The Oratory of James Callaghan:

'We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession...'

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### Introduction

Somewhere between Ted Heath's flirtation with, and Margaret Thatcher's zealous commitment to, monetarist economic doctrine, Jim Callaghan famously declared at Labour's 1976 Blackpool conference that '[w]e used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession...I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists (Labour Party Annual Conference Report [LPACR], 1976: 188). The speech was fashioned by Callaghan's son-in-law, Peter Jay, and although Callaghan stopped shy of using the second half of Jay's preferred elegy indicating the need to adopt a more entrepreneurial 'market socialist' approach, his words were taken to signal a turning point in modern British politics away from the traditional economic policies and instruments of the post-war consensus, and for some the death throes of Keynesian social democracy in an emerging era of so-called 'New Realism'. Although of course not without significant opposition, a sustained period of economic decline and the perceived failures of British economic policy from the mid-1960s provided the context for the logic of Callaghan's argument, which was enhanced through his increasing authority and credibility as Prime Minister after a relatively slow start in economic affairs as Chancellor of the Exchequer (Beckett, 2009, 337-9; Callaghan, 1988: 425; Healey, 1991: 443). Moreover, Callaghan's biographer, Kenneth Morgan, has suggested that his stewardship of the period of transition reflected in the speech represented a critical juncture and pioneering step in the long 'modernising' trajectory of the Labour Party itself in 'pursuing the Yellow Brick Road...from Attlee's Little Way to Blair's Third Way'. Principal themes of Callaghan's rhetoric from 1976 in economic policy, education and more latterly defence policy signified an, albeit interrupted, departure point and framework for successive stages of social democratic and Labour revisionism and modernisation (Bogdanor, 2007: 168-71; Morgan, 1998; 1999: 134, 149; 2007). Certainly, the cherished belief that social goals could be achieved by fiscal means was now under intense scrutiny as Callaghan announced to

his party that this ‘cosy world we were told would go on forever, where full employment would be guaranteed by the stroke of the Chancellor’s pen...no longer exists’ (LPACR, 1976: 188).

Callaghan’s speech concerning Britain’s macroeconomic future remains his most recognisable rhetorical flourish and is often held to denote the so-called crisis and turn of British social democracy in the mid-1970s, but represents only one of a number of oratorical interventions in party and national policy. Callaghan famously held all four major offices of state as Chancellor, Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister in a long political career that saw him first enter Parliament in the Labour landslide victory of 1945, which helped to generate something of the trust in his experience and character that he was to appeal to in his political oratory. Consequently, his political and public profile involved experience across a range of recurrent themes of Labour and Britain’s post-war trajectory, including national economic management, education policy, industrial relations strategy and labour movement relations, home affairs, Britain’s relationship with Europe and the wider world and latterly Labour’s international and defence policy. This chapter assesses Callaghan’s oratory across the spectrum of his political and public roles and experience, and evaluates his relative success in advancing his position or that of the Labour Party as evidenced by his party and wider public impact. It suggests that, with obvious notable exceptions, Callaghan demonstrated undoubted party and public communication skills, often in difficult circumstances during his prime ministerial tenure, and held it to be one of his core political strengths. His identification with the ‘touch-stone of public opinion’, expression of the ‘personal touch’ and ability to communicate a message of calm and reassurance were regarded as the essence of his political method and appeal, even in the darkest days of his Labour government (Morgan, 1997a: 308-9, 515-516; 1997b; 2007).<sup>1</sup> Building on his affinity with public opinion and personal popularity, Callaghan’s oratorical interventions and presentational nous were perhaps more developed, innovative and forward-looking than one might expect.

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<sup>1</sup> Callaghan’s allegedly casual response to questions about ‘mounting chaos’ in the country on his return from an international conference in January 1979 did little to promote a mood of calm and reassurance in the heat of the ‘winter of discontent’. His attempts to present a reassuring public manner were increasingly viewed as inappropriately relaxed to the point of complacency in critical circumstances. Neither could his earlier, seemingly dismissive and brusque, treatment of political allies in the trade unions in announcing his decision not to hold a general election in September 1978 (itself considered to be a fatal strategic error) be considered a public relations success (Morgan, 1997a: 661-2; 1999: 147).

## **Political oratory, Callaghan and the Labour Party**

Broadly defined, oratory refers to the art of public speaking and the means and style of delivery and rhetoric denotes the language and content of the speech. The concept of political rhetoric has increasingly developed negative connotations as ‘just empty words’ and is viewed in unfavourable contrast to ‘substance’ or action (Fairclough, 2000: vii; Jamieson, 1988: ix; Toye, 2010: 2-3). Equally, the art of political oratory has been transformed or even supplanted by the immediacy and abbreviation of new electronic media. Fortunately, the majority of Labour orators here are those who traverse more recent developments of the electronic media, retaining at least one foot in the pre-Twitter age and belong to the ‘last generation of British practitioners’ whose careers were enhanced by their ‘skills as performers’. Nevertheless, developments of electronic and public media have diversified traditional channels and skills of political oratory. If we have not quite reached the point at which ‘an interview on the *Today* programme’ always matters more than a set-piece parliamentary speech, or alighted at an emaciated political culture in which critical political communication is conveyed exclusively through Twitter and similar blogs, we have arrived at the stage at which the long trajectory of technological change has invited, in the words of one analyst reflecting on the momentous effects of previous ‘new media’, a cosy ‘fireside chat’ as much as the prototype ‘fiery oratory’ (Jamieson, 1988: 42; Richards, 2011).

Collectivist developments and interpretations have dominated analysis of Labour’s character and progress, yet the role of individuals can have a significant impact on perspectives of a party’s disposition and performance. The role of oratory and use of rhetoric remains an important dimension and weapon of a politician’s armoury as a tool to shape persuasive argument and to advance (or otherwise) their cause and appeal. ‘Speech is a powerful master’, evinced Gorgias, and Aristotle emphasised both aesthetic and practical elements and virtues of the use of language as rhetoric as ‘the available means of persuasion’ and their proper combination as effective presentation and witness of precision and clarity of thought (Aristotle, 2004: vii). Modern political analysts suggest that the study of speech and rhetoric ‘as a form of and mode of political action in its own right’ offers a potentially fertile means to analyse and explain core themes of political enquiry in the study of ‘political institutions, ideologies and strategies’. Recognition of the ‘rhetorical tradition’ and the addition of ‘argument’ to the realm of ideas as the basis of ‘political persuasion and preference transformation’ allows for a more coherent understanding of the ‘strategic and collective

nature of political decision-making' (Finlayson, 2007: 545-6; Finlayson & Martin, 2008: 445-6; Thomas-Symons, 2006: 65).

Building on the insights of the 'classical authorities', Glover identifies 'three forms of proof of a speaker's case', as the distinction between (or combination of) *logos* or 'logic' as the logical coherence of a speaker's case, supported by evidence; *pathos* or 'emotion' as the appeal to the particular emotions of the audience; and *ethos* or 'character' as the appeal to trust through the speaker's character and experience. Callaghan's oratory as we shall see is firmly set within the latter category. Each represents an outward appeal to a particular audience, and the classical authorities agreed that a further component of successful oratory involved the adjustment of the orator to the differential contexts, perceptions and expectations of their audience. Effective oratory is dependent on the production of a speech 'apt for the occasion' and the ideal orator is one who can present 'commonplace matters simply, lofty subjects impressively, and topics...between in a tempered style' (Aristotle, 2004: vii; Glover, 2011: 55-7). Drawing on Cicero, Glover (2011: 60) suggests that the first task of successful speechwriting and delivery is 'to find out who will be in the forum', to '[k]now your audience'. In Labour's case, this includes the parliamentary arena, as the focal point of British political discourse and debate; wider party, movement and Conference audiences, traditionally central to questions of Labour's distribution of power and intra-party governance and indicative of the prevailing mood of the wider party (Minkin, 1978); and wider public and electorate through public meetings and the mass media. As was the case with other Labour figures in the volume, Callaghan's notable oratory occurred largely outside the parliamentary arena, to wider Labour movement and Conference audiences and through public appearances and the national media. As Labour leader and Prime Minister, he contributed to party and national debates on developments and future direction of economic and education policy and although it has arguably declined as the key forum of political communication, also contributed several noteworthy parliamentary interventions across a range of core themes of domestic and international policy. Largely departing from the predominantly *logos* and/or *pathos* led rhetorical traditions of leaders of the Gaitskellite revisionist right and 'hard' left, there was more of a sense of collegial and negotiated *ethos* to Callaghan's oratory.

Callaghan occupied a relatively fluid and non-ideological location of 'pragmatic labourism' at the juncture of Labour's centre and traditional right and, as such, was unencumbered by

'hard' association with any political grouping or ideological affiliation (Heppell *et al*, 2010:69; Meredith, 2008: 114-115; Morgan, 1997a: 384-5; Plant *et al*: 1-3, 120-4). As party leader, he was unsympathetic to minority groups and unwilling to endorse even factions of the centre-right leadership-loyalist variety, such as the Manifesto Group (The Times, 22 April 1976; also see Callaghan Papers, Speeches and Speech Notes, 79-80, speech to the All Wales Rally, Brecon, 5 July 1980). He was also intent to retain a wider platform of support in the party, to appeal to the 'soft centre' as well as the party right (Labour Party Manifesto Group Papers, LP MANIF/1, William Rodgers to Alec McGivan, 15 November 1979; Morgan, 1997b). While it may have appeared to Labour's more impassioned, ideologically-grounded orators that his rhetoric lacked some of their rousing emotional intensity, Callaghan's lack of a distinctive ideological position allowed him to appeal to a wider party platform than for instance colleagues of the 'new' or post-revisionist Labour right, such as Roy Jenkins, with clear benefits for his pragmatic and 'incremental social democratic' approach (Williams, 2002). There was a sense in which he 'always positioned himself in such a way that he could strike out in a number of different directions' politically and rhetorically, which delivered 'some rather unexpected alliances notably when in the period of opposition when he does...tactically appear to move to the left both on trade union matters and on Europe in 1971-2' (Callaghan, 1971; Morgan, 1997a: 383-4; 1997b). In the corrosive atmosphere of Labour politics of the early 1970s, Callaghan's more collegial, less polarising and alliance-shaping style and language were less divisive than those such as Jenkins. His successful challenge for the party leadership in 1976, in a contest crowded with candidates of the centre-right, is testament to his ability to cast his net beyond the parameters of the party's defined ideological groupings to elicit support from a wider cross-section of the party (Heppell *et al*, 2010: 65, 68, 89). In his appeal to centrist left and right opinion and twin focus on loyalty and party unity and moderation and 'common sense', he adopted an approach that proved successful and popular with those apprehensive of the divisive tendencies of factional figureheads of left and right (Crosland Papers, 6/3, Statement to the Press Association, 17 March 1976; Radice, 2002: 4, 234). In 1976 he was successfully able to garner support from the 'labourist' centre, centre and social democratic right and centre-left of Labour's ideological spectrum (Heppell *et al*, 2010: 70, 75), largely through his *ethos* and its appeal to trust in his ability to maintain party unity as the least divisive of the respective candidates and the value of his experience, relationships and rapport with the wider party and movement.

### **Conference, movement and nation**

Recurrent problems of recession, limited growth, inflation and unemployment set him at the forefront of debates regarding Britain's macroeconomic future, and Callaghan's most notable oratorical intervention occurred at Labour's 1976 Blackpool party conference in which he undertook the perilous mission to convince his party and labour movement allies of the need to accept a fundamental review of traditional tools of economic management in challenging and shifting circumstances:

We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession, and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting Government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists, and in so far as it ever did exist, it only worked on each occasion since the war by injecting a bigger dose of inflation into the economy, followed by a higher level of employment as the next step. Higher inflation followed by higher unemployment. That is the history of the last twenty years.

(Labour Party Annual Conference Report [LPACR], 1976: 188)

Callaghan's evolving rhetoric in this respect attempted to subvert core assumptions of traditional social democratic political economy. The cherished belief that social democratic values and goals could be achieved by fiscal means was now under intense scrutiny, and Callaghan announced to his party in 1976 that this 'cosy world we were told would go on forever, where full employment would be guaranteed by the stroke of the Chancellor's pen...no longer exists' (LPACR, 1976: 188). Rhetorically, Callaghan was able to utilise his established *ethos* to advance the *logos* of his controversial case.

Preceding his transformative set-piece speech, Callaghan delivered preparatory 'warm-up' speeches to various labour movement and national audiences on the recurrent theme of economic 'realism'. Largely adopting *ethos*-driven rhetoric to create trust in his message and leadership, he set out his stall directly in his first prime ministerial broadcast in April 1976. Addressing the nation, he conveyed his intention to take them into his confidence, 'to give you, the people of Britain, and to share with you, my thoughts about our country and what we should be doing'. Unsurprisingly, the substantive political theme involved national 'economic prospects' and priority of tackling twin evils of inflation and unemployment. In the deliberative style and language of his delivery, Callaghan attempted to draw his audience in to his vision and to make responsibility for the task as inclusive as possible, both congratulating the labour movement for its co-operation and reminding it of the need for even

greater effort. His rhetoric combined a strong sense of *ethos* with a feel for *pathos*, playing to the emotions and conscience of his audience, and emphasised issues of experience, co-operation and partnership and trust. Clearly leading with a sense of *ethos*, '[s]peaking as one who has served in all of the five Labour Governments since the end of [the] war', he identified a 'combination of purpose and experience' as the basis of success. In the form of the 'social contract', it was clear that the Labour government's aim was to pursue a persuasive conciliatory partnership with the trade unions (in contrast to 'Mr Heath's ruinous policy of confrontation') to combat the pressure points of an ailing economy and tense industrial relations. Again, the *logos* or logical coherency of his case was enhanced by his primary appeal to *ethos* and auxiliary *pathos* of his presentation

The watchwords of Callaghan's rhetoric and illustrative of the fusion of *ethos* and *pathos* to underpin the logic of his argument, were those of candour and transparency in the presentation of 'no soft options', a sense of common and shared purpose, a focus on progress and positive advances, combined with a cautionary tale of a job only half done. He routinely pursued the link and fusion of national and sectional interests, and declared that it was a national problem that could only be improved with a 'national effort' of 'everyone in it together'. He evoked the Lincolnesque idiom of '[g]overnment...by consent', when he declared '[t]ell the people, consult the people, trust the people, and we can win the people to whatever measures are required', and attempted to convey a positive message that his was not just a defensive government but one that retained a desire to demonstrate Labour's progressive principles and reforming edge in improved conditions (Callaghan Papers, Speeches and Broadcasts, 1970s, Prime ministerial broadcast, 5 April 1976; Speeches and Speech Notes, 1974-6, Speech to the Co-operative Party Annual Conference, Edinburgh, 13 April 1974). Again demonstrating evidence of strong rhetorical *ethos*, speaking as someone 'with a lifetime understanding of the strength of the Trade Union Movement and the stresses that are placed upon it', allowed him to identify common interests and objectives. He was not asking them to be 'soft-hearted' just because they supported a Labour government, but to be 'hard-headed' in acknowledging that their 'real interests' lay with wider national interests. He employed this intimacy and a sense of shared and aspirational *pathos* to both express common ground and purpose and to challenge the trade unions to persist with 'the same understanding and co-operation' to defeat inflation and to 'begin to improve our real standard of life based on increased efficiency and productivity' to build a 'brighter future in which the positive purpose and shared principles and values of the Labour government and trade union

movement can flourish' (Callaghan Papers, Speeches and Broadcasts, 1970s, speech to the National Committee of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers [AUEW], Scarborough, 19 May 1976; Speech to the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers [USDAW] Annual Conference, Blackpool, 25 April 1976).

A further common refrain of Callaghan's pre-Blackpool speeches to both labour movement and wider public audiences was to identify the need for and record the progress of the 'new air of realism' in economic expectations, exhorting audiences to respect the link between spiralling wage claims and price rises and high rates of inflation and unemployment. He claimed that a 'new air of realism' had permeated the national consciousness of mid-1970s Britain, and attempted to link the role and responsibilities of the trade unions with this wider shift 'throughout the country', while acknowledging their unique position and influence in this respect. Increasingly, Callaghan's rhetoric evolved around and linked three consistent themes. The first appeal to economic 'realism' was framed within the second claim that the adverse economic circumstances were not just a Labour or British problem, but rather the 'effect of the economic blizzard that has struck the world since 1973', which thirdly served as a means of managing the expectations of his audiences of Labour activists and trade unionists and as a reminder of the need to subscribe to wider national interests, priorities and developments. Rhetorically, Callaghan framed his delivery by utilising and linking his appeal to *ethos* and *pathos* to advance the *logos* of his argument and case, which broadly reflected his moderate centrist position and perspective:

The most important happening in Britain in 1975 was the new air of realism which swept the country about our economic prospects. People realised and then openly said that wage increases could not continue at last year's fantastic rate without sending prices through the roof. ...One final word to you, the Labour activists. Twice in the last thirty years Labour Governments have been called to office at times when the nation has faced massive economic problems. Twice we have been able to call on the British people for self-sacrifice and discipline. Each time they have responded only for we, the movement, to falter, lose our way and lose their confidence.

(Callaghan Papers, Speeches and Speech Notes, 1974-76, draft speech for meeting at Woolwich, 30 January 1976)

### **1976 annual conference speech**



Callaghan's 1976 conference speech represented a further set-piece attempt to alert those of his own party and Labour alliance of the new realities and possibilities of economic policy (Conroy, 2006: 95-6). The subsequent *logos* of Callaghan's appeal, or at least the parts which 'made the fur fly' (Callaghan, 1988: 425-7), provoked a mixed response and ambiguous meanings. It would have been something akin to music to the ears to the more liberal instincts of embattled revisionist social democrats and organisations in the party such as the Manifesto Group of centre-right Labour MPs pressing for some revision of Labour's economic thinking, and offered hope of a reappraisal of the strained precepts of Labour's traditional social democratic political economy to circumvent a potential economic and electoral void (Labour Party Manifesto Group Papers, LP/MANIF/18, Manifesto Group, 'What We Must Do: A Democratic Socialist Approach to Britain's Crisis', March 1977; LP/MANIF/3, Manifesto Group, 'The Future of Counter-Inflation Policy', January 1979; The Times, 30 September 1977). The directness and admission of the key evolutionary passage, '[w]e used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession, and increase unemployment by cutting taxes and boosting Government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists, and in so far as it ever did exist, it only worked by injecting a bigger dose of inflation into the economy, followed by a higher level of unemployment at the next step' (LPACR, 1976: 188), was explicit indictment of both prior Conservative profligacy and traditional social democratic Labour policies in challenging and fluid economic circumstances. In this respect, Callaghan added some sense of *logos* to his rhetorical armoury through more of an evidential analysis to compliment the overarching *ethos* of his delivery. It represented repudiation of the unproductive first months of the Labour government, when public expenditure and rising inflation ran unchecked and, tied to acceptance of IMF terms, anticipated the onset of a change of economic template routinely pursued by successive governments. Whether anything of the package of reforms associated with 'Thatcherism' would have been enacted if Labour had won in 1979 remains a moot point, but arguably there is a sense in which the 'winds of change' were already airborne in Callaghan's address.

Others in the party and wider movement believed that Callaghan's speech suggested that Labour's leader had perhaps too readily accepted resurgent governing economic orthodoxies and monetarist principles, but negative responses to Callaghan's ambiguous rhetoric again implied that something significant had changed. It appeared to represent a 'renunciation of the full-employment policy all governments since the...War had pursued' and rejection of the key role of public expenditure. Callaghan himself was no 'theologian of monetary doctrines',

but rather ‘remained prudent in economic affairs’ and believed that ‘certain monetary disciplines were essential to good economic management...and...sustained economic growth’. He later claimed that the speech was not intended to argue that governments should ‘never increase public expenditure or reduce taxation as methods of boosting employment’, but ‘in the circumstances of 1976 these measures were not appropriate’. Based on his particular and relatively successful appeal to *ethos*, it may have been only Callaghan among Labour’s leadership who could have even hinted at taking his party beyond its economic comfort zone at this point. His *ethos* allowed him to adopt a clear forward-looking strand to his rhetoric that neither were reliance on traditional tools an alternative ‘to facing up to the long-term changes that were required in our economy and in our society’, interpreted in sections of his audience as the ‘first flickering of monetarism in post-war Britain putting the fight against inflation ahead of the aim of maintain full employment’ (Callaghan, 1988: 427; Conroy, 2006: 95-6).

Morgan (1999: 149; 2007) suggests of the longer-term meaning and implications of Callaghan’s ‘momentous’ and, for good or bad, transformative 1976 conference oratory that, if nothing else, it demonstrated his ‘capacity to move on’ in economic policy and more broadly, and questions lazy views of him as a ‘limited machine’ politician and ‘standpat symbol of Old Labour’. Although it remained unsurprisingly ambiguous, Morgan identifies the tiniest seeds of Labour’s subsequent, admittedly lengthy, modernising trajectory, and even something of the ‘new economics of New Labour’ in Callaghan’s rhetoric. Some later evangelists of ‘New’ Labour, who perceived Callaghan’s leadership to represent the death throes of the old corporatist order, needed to acknowledge that ‘it was then that many of their party’s social and economic policies were modernized and redefined’ (Morgan, 1997a: 557-8; 1998). Callaghan’s rhetorical *ethos* based on moderate pragmatic social democracy underpinned the *logos* of ‘moving on’ and offered the first footprint of second-stage social democratic modernisation, whether inside or outside the party.

### **‘Education, education, education’: 1976 Ruskin speech and the ‘Great Education Debate’**

In the period of relative calm before the storm, between successful navigation of the IMF crisis and upturn in economic fortunes and the disquiet of the first rumblings of the ‘winter of discontent’, Callaghan was able to pursue themes of particular interest in his public oratory

(Jay, 1980; Morgan, 2007). His landmark speech at Ruskin College Oxford in October 1976 ‘heralded the Great Debate’ on national education policy and raised issues of the ‘quality of educational instruction...in a way that was prophetic’ (Callaghan Papers, Ruskin Speech, 1976, Letter from Maurice Kogan, 31 July 1985; Morgan, 1999: 149; 2007). Echoing Tony Crosland’s recent warning to local authorities that ‘the party’s over’ and some of the principal notices of his 1976 conference address, Callaghan’s Ruskin speech was intended as an intervention in the debate over national education policy and standards in state schools, provoked in part by his frustration with views that the quality of provision was merely a monetary issue. He asserted that ‘there is a challenge to us all in these days and a challenge in education is to examine its priorities and to secure as high efficiency as possible by the skilful use of existing resources’ (Callaghan Papers, Ruskin Speech, 1976, Speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, 18 October 1976; Morgan, 2004: 46):

Callaghan’s speech represented a courageous intervention in the closeted world of education policy. At the time, it was considered unusual for generalists and prime ministers to ‘interfere openly’ in this private sphere, and the speech caused ‘some surprise’ and the sense that he ‘must have ulterior motives’, particularly from within the educational establishment and among the Labour left who interpreted it as an assault on ‘progressive’ education (Adonis, 2006; Barber, 2001; Callaghan Papers, Ruskin Speech, 1976, Ruskin Anniversary Lecture, Institute of Education, 15 October 1996). Relatively ‘mild in language but firm in intent’, the understated *pathos* and *logos* of Callaghan’s rhetoric ‘transformed and continues to define public debate about education’. If expressed by Tony Blair at the peak of ‘New’ Labour, it might have been considered familiar and unexceptional, but in the context of the time it was ‘revolutionary’, opening up a ‘great debate in public’ on education and lighting ‘a flare that has illuminated education reform ever since’ (Adonis, 2006; Woodward, 2001). The speech erected ‘a bridge between one era and the next’, passing from an ‘era of consensus to an ‘era of accountability’, as a landmark of post-war educational history (Barber, 1996). It raised issues that have dominated the discourse of education ever since: accountability, quality and effectiveness, the (core) curriculum and, perhaps most profoundly, the relationship between teachers, parents, government and industry.

Callaghan’s rhetoric again attempted to inclusively link national issues of access and improvement in education with the values of the labour movement, and the ethical socialist influence of Tawney provided a benchmark. Successfully combining *pathos* and *logos*, he

posed the typically intimate question of ‘what do we want from the education of our children and our young people’, for which he drew on Tawney for an answer: “[w]hat a wise parent would wish for their children, so the State must wish for all its children”, and challenged vested interests to recognise both the moral and practical dimensions and value of educational provision as a national and labour and working class priority (Adonis, 2001). Responding to the concerns of parents and industry that the balance had shifted too far in a non-vocational direction in some of the ‘new informal teaching methods’ and lack of a core curriculum, Callaghan chose to intervene in the rarefied world of education in the national and labour interest:

The goals of our education...are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive place in society and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other; but both. For many years the accent was simply on fitting a so-called inferior group of children with just enough learning to earn their living in the factory. There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills...In today’s world, higher standards are demanded than were required yesterday and there are simply fewer jobs for those without skill. Therefore we demand more from our schools than did our grandparents.

(Callaghan Papers, Ruskin Speech, 1976, Speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, 18 October 1976)

Utilising the *logos* dimension of his delivery, Callaghan identified core themes he wanted for further discussion. These included review of the ‘methods and aims of informal instruction’, the ‘strong case’ for a ‘core curriculum of basic knowledge’, the ‘proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance’, the ‘role of the inspectorate in relation to national standards’, problems of the examination system, particularly in relation to ‘less academic students staying at school beyond the age of 16’ and the ‘need to improve relations between industry and education’; all at ‘a time before the national curriculum, before Ofsted, before league tables’ (Adonis, 2006; Callaghan Papers, Ruskin Speech, 1976, Speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, 18 October 1976; Denis Healey’s Office, note on ‘Adult Literacy’, nd; Woodward, 2001). Through the relative intimacy and candour of the linked *pathos* and *logos* of his delivery, Callaghan’s intention was to stimulate national debate and was successful in the sense that it provoked what has been termed ‘the Great Debate’ that has largely continued unabated ever since. He was a politician of the broad left concerned openly about ‘new informal teaching methods’ and school standards, and a generalist prime minister offering a view of ‘what should be taught and how it should be

taught'. Callaghan's accumulated and enhanced *ethos* and refusal to take advice 'to watch [his] language' in public discussion of a 'core curriculum' meant his rhetoric 'at a stroke would end 100 years of non-interference in state education' (Callaghan Papers, Ruskin Speech, 1976, Speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, 18 October 1976; Woodward, 2001).

Callaghan's Ruskin speech was representative of a broader approach in his oratory to articulate his party and government's philosophy through an overarching national theme, in this case 'public standards, related to social cohesion' and a socially responsible citizenry. It represented an attempt to divert educational debate away from sectarian arguments over selection and comprehensive education to a more fundamental concern over national educational standards (Morgan, 1997a: 503, 540-1). The tone of the speech also reflected a further point of departure between Callaghan and the Labour left, who regarded his emphasis on national standards and 'quality control' as 'traditionalist' and 'reactionary'. Tony Benn was appalled by what he perceived to be a 'right-wing' attack on comprehensive schools. Benn's wife expressed her belief that it represented a direct assault on the 'lefties' who are teaching the social sciences', but with a typical appeal to *ethos* through his 'homely' and 'common sense' rhetoric, embodying personal commitment and practical knowledge, never far away, the speech 'struck a powerful chord' (Barber, 1996; Benn, 1989, 626-7; Callaghan Papers, Ruskin Anniversary Lecture, Institute of Education, 15 October 1996; Morgan, 1997a: 541). In the economic context, the 'Great Debate' failed to gather momentum, but Callaghan's Ruskin speech is regarded as a landmark of British educational thinking. Core themes of a national curriculum, system of assessment and new emphasis on professional skills and training of teachers were subsequently adopted in more confrontational circumstances than Callaghan envisaged. It's starting point and central concerns became almost conventional as the basis of political and public debate on education, both within 'New' Labour and beyond (Adonis, 2006; Barber, 1996; Blair, 1996; Morgan, 1997a: 541).

### **1978 TUC conference speech**

Callaghan's 1976 conference speech may have been ambiguous in the extent to which it marked a decisive turning point in the political economy of social democracy, but it was his address to another labour movement forum at the 1978 conference of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) that generated no little confusion and potentially damaging consequences for Labour's immediate electoral prospects. He (in)famously adopted the lyrics of a music

hall song to 'entertain' delegates about his decision *not* to call a general election for the autumn, a decision, speech and mode of delivery that was seen to test the patience of trade union 'allies' and damage fragile moral. For once, he appeared to desert his tried and tested *ethos* in favour of an unsuccessful attempt to incorporate an element of *pathos* in his rhetoric, given that he intended to beguile his audience with humorous cultural references but generated only confusion and irritation. Economic fortunes had to some extent revived in the aftermath of Callaghan's 1976 'bombshell' and subsequent IMF settlement. Callaghan's profile and popularity were considered to be significantly higher than those of his Conservative opponent (Jay, 1980; Morgan, 1997a: 558; 2007; Shore, 1993: 116). Although not a fact universally acknowledged (Shore, 1993: 116-17), the decision not to call an election for the autumn may have been a strategic mistake that undermined Labour's electoral chances, but it was the context and manner of the announcement that bemused and alienated his trade union audience and reflected clear oratorical misjudgement. Although he had not been previously averse to using a degree of 'praise-and-blame' rhetoric with trade union audiences in relation to economic circumstances and priorities, there is a sense in which he reverted to misjudged epideictic rather than deliberative oratory, which was perhaps ill-fitted to the gravity of the situation and to some extent left Callaghan outside his rhetorical comfort zone. At a critical juncture for the Labour government and, given the concerns of and increasingly testing relationship with his anxious audience, engagement in deliberative discourse and his more conventional and appropriate *ethos*-led delivery may have produced a different reaction and responses from a core audience. It certainly did not serve to highlight the co-ordination and harmony of the Labour alliance. Delegates had expected Callaghan to use his speech to announce the date of an October general election, but instead he treated them to his own (misattributed) version of Vesta Victoria's old music hall favourite, 'Waiting at the Church', to convey the message that he had not promised and nor would there be a general election that year:

There was I waiting at the Church, waiting at the Church, waiting at the Church, when I found he'd left me in the lurch, Lor' how it did upset me. All at once he sent me round a note, here's the very note, this is what he wrote, 'can't get away to marry you today, my wife won't let me!'

On completion of the ditty, he reiterated that 'I have promised nobody that I shall be at the altar in October nobody at all' (Callaghan Papers, Speeches 76-7, 78, Speech to the TUC Conference, Brighton, 5 September 1978; Transcript of ministerial broadcast, 7 September

1978; TUC Report, 1978: 522 ). Delegates were perplexed to hear the Prime Minister burst into song, which many observers misinterpreted to mean that he would call an election for the autumn and it would be the Conservatives who would be 'left...in the lurch', 'waiting at the Church' (McKie, 2005; Morgan, 1997a: 642-3; 2007; The Times, 5 September 1978). Core economic messages of Callaghan's speech around a 'strong defence' of the 5% pay norm were lost or unheeded in the confusion of the non-election announcement. The communication of the decision to hang on until the spring of 1979 represented a public relations disaster and the first of a series of political and communication errors that plagued Callaghan and his government in its denouement (Conroy, 2006: 114-15; Morgan, 1997a: 642-3; 1999: 147-8; 2007). Callaghan's misplaced reliance on *pathos* and seemingly flippant treatment of labour movement allies was carried over into a speech to open the new Transport and General Workers (TGWU) building in Cardiff, when he joked to general secretary, Moss Evans, 'I tell you what Moss if you promise not to make another speech about pay policy, I'll promise not to sing' (Callaghan Papers, Speeches, 76-7, 78, Speech at the opening of the new Wales TGWU building, Cardiff, 16 September 1978). Although Callaghan's generally relaxed and genial manner and communication were considered core strengths of his broadly effective public image, there is a sense in which his public pronouncements from late September 1978 lacked the appropriate degree of gravitas and appreciation of circumstances, culminating in the very public gaffe of (the misquoted) 'Crisis, what crisis?' on his suntanned return from a conference in Guadeloupe. Morgan concludes of the misguided 'showbiz turn' that set in motion the train of strategic and public communication errors that hindered the latter stages of his government, '[i]f politicians decide to borrow from popular culture' in political rhetoric, then 'ambiguity is a dangerous thing' (Morgan, 1997a: 497, 643; 2004: 47; 2007). Callaghan's increasingly misplaced attempts to adopt *pathos* in his delivery conflicted with his image of *ethos*-driven *logos* and, combined with increasing use of epideictic oratory incompatible with a core audience expecting and accustomed to his deliberative style, served to undermine his *ethos* at a critical point of his government's labour movement and public dialogue and negotiations.

### **Callaghan, Parliament and policy**

Callaghan's 'era-shaping' oratory, often expressed with 'characteristic understatement' (Woodward, 2001), was largely confined to wider public and labour movement arenas, but he also made notable contributions from within Parliament in other areas in which he might be

seen as a reformer, or at least in a manner that helped to revise or ‘attain a better balance’ to Labour attitudes and perspectives on issues such as law and order, Europe and defence (Morgan, 2004: 46; 2007). One such example late in his parliamentary career, at a point when Labour was attempting to revise its ideological and policy platform away from recently dominant left-wing themes, was his rhetorical assault on the party’s left-led defence policy in 1987, reflecting something of Callaghan’s old animosity towards the Labour left. His language was far less ‘collegiate’ and ‘conciliatory’ on this occasion and was intended as a direct attack on Labour’s ‘confused’ stance of unilateral nuclear disarmament and to ridicule and undermine the notion of a ‘fixed’ ideological position on the issue in rapidly changing circumstances. With ‘realist’ echoes of Bevan’s ‘naked into the conference chamber’ speech to Labour’s 1957 Brighton conference, and allowing a little *logos* to creep into his case, he argued:

The question whether we go ahead with Trident is a moot point...I would not take a fixed view on Trident for ever [but] I would not abandon it now. The situation may change...Certainly we should not give Trident up for nothing. We must negotiate our way out of this...I hope that all hon. Members, wherever we may sit, will continue to review the changing circumstances in defence as events occur. The position today is certainly not the position of four years ago and it is even less the position when I left office. No one should adopt a fixed position for ever and allow considerations on defence weapons to be turned into ideology. That would be absurd.

(HC Deb 9 March 1987 vol 112 cc28-81)

The impact of Callaghan’s speech in the twilight of his parliamentary career should not be underestimated. Again, utilising his accumulated *ethos* in a modernising party environment, he maintained his rare capacity to enrage and downgrade the concerns of the far left of his party, but more widely was perceived to represent the reassuring voice of ‘common sense’ Labour. In addition to John Prescott’s tea-room opprobrium, there was an immediate outcry from the Labour left attacked in their inner sanctum, and huge correspondence from members of constituency Labour parties and wider public in reaction to the views and language of Callaghan’s speech. While some decried his ‘public criticism of Labour’s defence policy’ and the potential damage to Labour’s election chances by showcasing internal divisions, others congratulated him on his ‘courage’ and ‘stand’ against the continuing ‘extremism’ of Labour’s official policy and for placing the ‘country’s welfare before party politics’. The views expressed in the speech were considered to reflect those of the majority of Labour voters rather than minority of hard core activists and left-wing ideologues of Labour’s policy-



making apparatus. Although Callaghan's intervention failed to help Labour in the 1987 general election, the party delivered a stronger performance than in 1983 and Callaghan's contribution supported Labour's rolling process of renewal and grail-like search for credibility and electability (Callaghan Papers, Defence Speech, 87, Letters and correspondence, March 1987; Morgan, 1997a: 728-9; The Times, 10 March 1987). Although he was generally a model of loyalty to his successors as party leader, he was prepared to court unpopularity to voice opposition to left-wing policies he considered damaging to Labour's wider profile and prospects. Again utilising his re-emerging *ethos* in a changing party environment, and with an echo of another, more recent, Tredegar-born leader, he told sceptical delegates to Labour's 1987 party conference:

What the movement has failed to understand is that it reversed the traditional policy of the Labour Party on which we had fought eleven successive elections without any real attempt to convince the British people what we were doing was right. I happen to believe it is wrong. But you make a fundamental mistake by believing that by going on marches and passing resolutions without any attempt to try to tell the British people what the consequences were, you could carry their vote. And you lost millions of votes.

(LPACR, 1987)

Callaghan also spoke with authority and no little effect in a series of major set-piece parliamentary debates on issues of foreign affairs during this period, which had the effect of both again demonstrating Labour's capacity for statesmanship in this sphere and upstaging the Conservative leadership. He was considered to have performed more effectively than his party leader during the Westland affair in January 1986. Clearly adopting linked *ethos* and *logos* to privilege his status and experience as a former prime minister, he contrasted his own defence of British aerospace interests in developing the joint European airbus in 1978 in the face of a challenge from Boeing with the current government's appeasement of the US Sikorski option at the expense of Europe. Morgan concludes that it was a 'highly effective performance', which added to Thatcher's discomfiture in a crisis that witnessed the resignation of Michael Heseltine and her own close call (HC Deb 15 January 1986 vol 89 cc1107-14; Morgan, 1997a: 728). Again, he spoke authoritatively in debates on the US attack on Libya in April 1986. He roused the House with his admission that, if he was still prime minister, he would not have allowed America to launch its bombing raids from Britain, and endorsed Ted Heath's statement on how he had refused use of British bases in Cyprus during

the 1973 Yom Kippur War. On this occasion, Thatcher was enclosed by enemies from without and within (HC Deb 16 April 1986 vol 95 cc893-97; Morgan, 1997a: 728).

In aspects of domestic policy, Callaghan's parliamentary work and presentation provided initiatives and developments of lasting party impact. These included as Home Secretary, developments of law and order and race and immigration policy, which had the effect of reworking Labour discourses and attitudes on these themes. On law and order, he is considered to have struck a balance for Labour between support for the police and 'championing free speech' and toleration of 'popular protest', for example in the case of the anti-Vietnam War protests in Grosvenor Square in March 1968. As a former Police Federation representative and utilising the tried and trusted *ethos* associated with his politics of moderation and balance, his careful and measured rhetoric in this respect helped to rebut some of the more lurid anti-police attitudes of constituency activists and help establish Labour as 'truly [a] party of law and order' (HC Deb 18 March 1968 vol 761 cc34-40; Morgan, 1998; 2007). In terms of his difficult stewardship of the thorny immigration context of the late 1960s, a stronger sense of *pathos* and *logos* filtered through Callaghan's oratory as he negotiated the well-trodden pragmatic-populist dimension of political rhetoric, in which he articulated some of the socially conservative tendencies associated with the wider labour movement and working class electorate. In the wake of the perceived liberalism of his predecessor, Roy Jenkins, Callaghan expressed more of the conservative instincts of his own non-conformist and 'labourist' background and appealed to a position he felt would be 'popular amongst Labour voters in industrial parts of the country'. Although his response was shaped by the immediacy and pressure of events, it represented a departure from the liberal Jenkins and conveyed a changing discourse and legacy for Labour on immigration, reflected perhaps in the 'pragmatic-populist' outlook of future Labour home secretaries such as David Blunkett and John Reid. We are reminded that it was Callaghan and the Labour government of the late 1960s, not the Conservative government of the late 1990s in its anti-refugee policies, which identified intrinsic dangers of the 'right of uncontrolled entry at any time in any numbers' for race relations (HC Deb 27 February 1968 vol 759 cc1241-368; Karvounis, 2003: 312). Callaghan's rhetorical and oratorical impact on the longer-term development and trajectory of his party went beyond the later (in)famous set-piece occasions for which he is best remembered. Again, his rhetorical contributions across a variety of issues of home affairs were largely founded on his moderate, pragmatic and centrist and consensual political

character and associated *ethos*, but he was not averse to the use of *pathos* and/or *logos* as the issue or situation and his audience demanded

## **Conclusion**

Callaghan was comfortable with his personal style and public communication. As strategic discussions of Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) for the 1979 general election campaign reveal, he was the first prime minister to indicate his willingness to take part in a televised debate, but it was Mrs Thatcher's refusal to take him on in this arena that denied the public their first opportunity to see the party leaders battle it out 'face-to-face' (Labour Party, NEC Minutes, 23 May 1979). Yet Callaghan was not a performer of the fire and brimstone variety, and his oratory lacked some of the emotional zeal of Aneurin Bevan. He adopted a largely 'realist' rather than 'romantic' style of oratory, but not necessarily one that relied on the highly rational presentation of factual evidence and reasoned argument Hugh Gaitskell. Neither did the non-university educated Callaghan attempt to appeal to and construct an *ethos* of particular or specialist competence in the mode of Gordon Brown's (sometimes confusing and inaccessible) emphasis on economic expertise. Callaghan's was an appeal to *ethos* mediated through a message of experience, familiarity, candour and mutual respect and responsibility in an atmosphere of collegiate and consensual leadership, peppered with a relatively loose sense of *logos* on the grander set-piece occasions of his 1976 Conference and Ruskin speeches. He wanted to take his audience with him, but only 'steady as she goes' as a 'calm pilot in the storm', with occasional recognition that the times, they are a changing. He made no claim to charismatic leadership, and as prime minister lacked some of the 'presidentialism' of a number of his successors. He preferred to operate collectively at party and movement, government and national levels, and his rhetoric was intended to inspire a sense of trust and broad consensus (Morgan, 1997b; 2007; The Times, 22 April 1976).

This approach had both strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. We know that he could be overly informal, relaxed and casual in his communication on occasion. In spite of the amusement displayed by some of the more senior members of the audience who recognised his music hall reference and refrain, Callaghan's misguided and obscure non-election announcement to the TUC in 1978 served only to both confuse and demoralise key allies in the trade unions and undermine Labour's fragile election prospects. It was interpreted as indecisiveness on Callaghan's part, and thereafter his government found itself

‘on the defensive’ and ‘at the mercy’ of minor nationalist parties in Parliament. Misconceived communication of wage claims policy from the leader who best ‘understood the...unions’ also helped to undermine the fragile ‘social contract’ and precipitate the ‘winter of discontent’. He announced the government’s decision of a 5% pay limit unexpectedly in a television interview and, while the level of increase outraged many of Labour’s natural constituency, the forum and manner of its delivery was equally unanticipated and disconcerting. Sun-tanned from a visit to the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, he is also eternally associated with a misguided (and misreported) response of ‘Crisis, what crisis?’ to questions about Britain’s ailing condition, which was taken to show how disconnected or nonchalant he had become about the situation (Morgan, 2007).

On the other hand, key set-piece rhetorical interventions, to some extent forced upon him and only in prototype, were ahead of their time (and his party), anticipating some of the principal themes of later ‘New’ Labour (Morgan, 1998; 2007), and providing a clear, if interrupted link, in Labour’s revisionist modernising trajectory. In economic policy, in education, in justice, he at least attempted to be a party and national reformer and, as prime minister, demonstrated a pragmatic, if largely thwarted, capacity to move forward. Arguably, Callaghan’s greatest single oratorical achievement was to commit ‘old-style’ socialism as a serious proposition to the political ashes. The principal turning point in British political economic management and priorities was not in 1979 and the election of Mrs Thatcher, but in 1976 as Callaghan opined to the Labour Party Conference ‘...I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists...’. Unfortunately, he was unable to cajole and take his party and movement with him on the ‘gentler, consensual, non-confrontational’ path he expressed and represented. It was left to the full-frontal assault of Thatcherism to oversee the transformation in full, a fact which the public (and Callaghan) recognised (Donoughue, 2009: 483-4, 492-3; Morgan, 1997a: 697; Sandbrook, 2008):

There are times, perhaps once every thirty years, when there is a sea-change in politics. It then does not matter what you say or what you do. There is a shift in what the public wants and what it approves of. I suspect there is now such a sea-change, and it is for Mrs Thatcher.

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