

## Fifty years after Martin Luther King's speech, Obama's gradual approach to political change still needs King's visionary dream to play against

*Last week saw the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, which was marked at an event by President Barack Obama. [Rune Kier](#) writes that while King's speech was one which articulated abrupt and revolutionary change to achieve equality against an apparently stagnant establishment, Obama's rhetoric is that of gradual, hard won, political change. Despite these differences, King's speech is still the vision that Obama is striving for.*

Last Wednesday, the first African-American President of the United States, Barack Obama, delivered a speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the iconic '[I have a dream](#)' speech by legendary civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. The speech not only has relevance for race-relations in the United States, but holds important lessons for Europe as it continues to struggle with the consequences of the on-going Eurozone crisis.

### King and his dream

There are many similarities between Obama and King, but also a few differences to learn from.

Martin Luther King Jr., Credit: Library of Congress (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Both are black men who talk about racial justice against the backdrop of the economy. Obama did it as a President struggling with an economic crisis, and King did it as a civil rights leader at the end of a March for Jobs and Freedom. Both draw heavily on biblical references and use the US Founding Documents to legitimise their claims. They spring from different times (1968 and 2013), they struggle with different challenges ([Jim Crow](#) and inequality) and they talk from different positions (civil society and the White House). Both are gifted orators who talk about change. The last thing is what strikes me most.

When [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, he did so as a civil society leader, on the backbone of Jim Crow segregation, and against an apparently stagnant establishment. His words illustrated that. The rights to equality in the Constitution was "a bad cheque" marked with "insufficient funds", he proposed a mesmerising visual dream that we could all see and he demonstrated a strong religiously motivated all-or-nothing approach to equality. On that day, King's rhetoric was advocating an understanding of social change as God-given salvation. Change was articulated as abrupt and revolutionary. King said it clearly in "the fierce urgency of now" as opposed to "the tranquilising drug of gradualism" or when claiming that no progress had been made for 100 years. His dream was widely considered utopian, all-encompassing and dangerous at the time. So much so that the [FBI initiated surveillance](#) and claimed he was a danger to the nation. **Obama's change**

President Barack Obama has another view of racial relations in the United States. Obama has consistently voiced his "[insistence on small miracles](#)" and highlights "[just how far our struggle has come](#)". In opening the [Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial](#) in 2006, Obama praised King for inspiring a nation "to begin to live up to its creed", not to "live out the true meaning of its creed" as were King's words. In 2008, under fire for his relationship with the controversial pastor Jeremiah Wright, Obama gave a speech titled "[A more perfect union](#)". In his speech Obama accused Reverend Wright of "a profoundly distorted view of this country – a view that sees white racism as endemic... as if our society was static... and irrevocably bound to a tragic past". For Rev. Wright that was true until the redemption – just as it was for King.

On [Wednesday Obama started](#) by recognising King's metaphor of 'a bad cheque' as a promise made in the

US Declaration of Independence. He went on to describe the March on Washington and its time and then stated what was accomplished. But he used gradual words like “more” and concluded that to “dismiss the magnitude of this progress – to suggest, as some sometimes do, that little has changed – that dishonours the courage and the sacrifice of those who paid the price to march in those years”. Obama’s ‘change’ is not the coming of Paradise that King dreamt of. It is the slow, hard political process of taking one step at a time. In some ways Obama’s gradual change is what King warned about, yet Obama quotes King on “the fierce urgency of now”.

And here the opposition is clear. Obama means the fierce urgency of beginning and holding on, King meant the fierce urgency of getting there and reaching the goal. As he said, “we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream”. Obama’s change is gradual, inherently political and reformist; King’s change is absolute, God-given and revolutionary. For King, justice was a bad cheque, described in the Constitution, and in 1968 he came to cash it. For Obama equality is still “a promise”, but one with the possibility of a down payment on “a more perfect union”.

Obama, puts forward a gradual understanding of change. That is the nature of politics and a necessity for voices of the establishment. He cannot talk about visionary utopias without being held to them. He cannot talk about drastic revolutionary change as they are what will be changed. He can only do ‘more’, compromise and ‘progress’. Yet Obama acknowledged that he would not be possible without King. Obama’s ‘more perfect union’ is a movement towards King’s ‘dream’ – indeed, he would not be in the White House without King. The dream legitimises his actions and shows his progress. It is his measuring stick and the detailed and visual image and vision he is striving for. Obama needs King’s visionary dream. King’s speech would have been entirely different had his dream been about ‘not getting any worse’, and Obama’s speech would have been without teeth had he not had King’s dream to play against.

*A version of this article first appeared at the [LSE’s EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy blog](#).*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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