

Creating an ideal citizenry: the perorations of twentieth-century Budget speeches

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Together with setting out fiscal policy, Budget speeches provide an opportunity for the government to sell their broader political philosophy, writes [Noel Thompson](#). He examines the language used in such speeches throughout the previous century and explains how the collective concepts of 'country', 'nation' and 'people' have been employed by chancellors to engage with the emotions of their audiences.



The Budget Speech is one of the great set pieces of parliamentary theatre: exquisitely choreographed from the press frenzy of the Chancellor's emergence from No. 11, to its partisan dismissal by his Shadow. As [Edmund Dell](#) put it: 'the Budget judgment was truly a judgment. The Chancellor came down to the House of Commons to announce his Budget as though his last consultation had been on Mount Sinai rather than the Treasury'.

Such speeches are therefore a rich source for the historian: not just for insight they give as to the mechanics of spending but also into the economic mind-set, strategy, and wider aspirations of the Party in power. Moreover, while their immediate audience is a packed and braying House of Commons, they are consciously addressed to a broader constituency, for no Chancellor can afford to ignore the perturbations in the City and the global financial community which his speech might cause, nor an electorate on whose material well-being the budget's contents impact and the government's future depends.

So, however burdened with the minutiae of fiscal measures and the arcane financial patois, budget speeches are a means of selling the government's economic strategy and broader political philosophy. And it is with an eye to this that a rhetorical analysis can yield insights.

Here the peroration of the speech is particularly revealing for, as the Roman writer [Quintilian](#) saw it, in the final flourish to a speech, 'appeals to emotion are necessary if there are no other means for securing the victory of truth, justice and the public interest'. Or, more prosaically, this is where a Chancellor can let his hair down and divert attention from the devil of detail to the inspirational and aspirational bigger picture. But how is this to be done?

One way is to flatter, if not necessarily to deceive at least to cultivate the receptivity of the Chancellor's wider audience and to do so by investing it collectively, whether as a 'nation', a 'people', a 'country' or a 'community' with particular virtues and attributes. Or, put another way, to construct rhetorically an ideal citizenry to which the Budget is addressed. And so, with apologies to Robert Burns, we have Chancellors discursively fashioning an electorate in a manner designed not for them to see themselves as others see them but as they would most like to see themselves.

So revenue-raising measures are transformed into a celebration of the citizenry's 'will', 'steadfastness', 'courage', 'tenacity', 'zeal', 'persistence', 'fortitude', 'determination', 'resolution' and 'willingness'; the qualities deemed necessary to meet the challenges which the Budget speech identifies. Through the delineation of these virtues, such perorations have served to construct an affirmative and laudatory notion of what it was to be British; one with which the populace would wish to identify. But, in so doing, Budget speeches have also associated their virtuous audience with responsibility for the delivery of what was being proposed.

Moreover, Chancellors have constructed this citizenry inclusively. So we have references to 'the whole nation', 'all members of the community', 'all classes', 'all parties', 'all age groups' and 'all of us'; to say nothing of the constant recourse to the first person plural.

As to the last of these, one example must suffice: an excerpt from the peroration of Neville Chamberlain's [budget speech of 1932](#), given when the country was in the depths of economic depression: 'So too *we of this nation*, though as yet prosperity is hidden from *us*, can feel assured that, so long as *our faces* are turned upwards and *our hearts* are strong, *we* are moving in the right direction. One day, perhaps almost before *we* know it, *we* shall find ourselves upon our mountain top.'

In this context 'hard work, strict economy, firm courage, unflinching patience', were represented as the signal moral qualities of the British people; those requisite 'if the summit was to be gained'. For 'nothing could be more harmful to the ultimate material recovery of this country or to its present moral fibre than that *we* should indulge *ourselves* with hopes, possibly ill-founded, certainly premature, which might tempt *us* to relax the efforts which have already produced a wonderful revival of public confidence'.

And so the detailing of the collective virtues of the 'we' both furnished a flattering self-image but, by the same token, gives the inclusive first personal plural responsibility for implementing the government's deflationary fiscal strategy. That said, it is interesting to note that this invocation of a morally virtuous collective has been less apparent in budget speeches later in twentieth century. For in its last quarter there was a tendency to imbue the citizenry with other, less obviously moral, and more individualistic and acquisitive attributes.

So it was praised for its 'enterprise and risk-taking', 'hard work' and 'ambition'; traits which were portrayed as integral to success in an increasingly competitive and turbulent economic world and which, while it was the government's responsibility to foster and incentivize, it was the citizenry's responsibility to deploy.

Thus [Geoffrey Howe's budget of 1979](#) was 'designed to give *the British people a greater opportunity* than they have had for years to win a higher standard of living—for their country *and for their families as well as for themselves*. I dare to believe they will respond to the *opportunity* that I have offered them today'.

So through the rhetorical creation, and recreation, of the 'people', the 'nation', the 'country' and the 'community', the Budget speech in general, and its peroration in particular, have been used to inspire their audiences both to embrace, and to assume responsibility for the success of, the government's financial strategy.

Note: the above is based on the author's [published article](#) in *British Politics*. Featured image credit: [Herry Lawford](#) CC BY.

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