

The power of a speech: the growing importance of communication from leaders

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Polis Intern and LSE MSc student Michael Bruton reports on the latest Polis Media Agenda Talk featuring Zaki Cooper, Group Public Affairs at Standard Chartered Bank



Photo by Szu-ting Chou

“If I’m King, where’s my power? Can I form a government? Can I levy a tax? Declare a war? No! And yet I am the seat of all authority. Why? Because the nation believes that when I speak, I speak for them. But I can’t speak.”

At a movie screening in 2011, I sat in awe as I watched Colin Firth depict King George VI as he struggled to overcome his speech impediment. Despite the challenges, which he faced in relation to speech, King George VI managed to lead Great Britain during a tumultuous period in British history. However, whilst I listened to Zaki Cooper’s lecture on ‘Communicating with Leaders’, I couldn’t help but wonder if George VI were King today, would he be viewed as an effective leader?

Today, politicians and leaders alike have to be effective communicators in order to rise to the top of the political pyramid. In 2008, Barack Obama swept the United States with a message of hope and change. Indeed, one can argue that he achieved victory in the presidential election because of his oratory talents. Is it now the case that one has to be a good communicator in order to become a leader in the 21st century?

Zaki Cooper (who once worked in the Buckingham Palace Press Office) articulated the dilemma that politicians face in the age of social media. With reference to David Cameron, Boris Johnson and John F. Kennedy, Cooper highlighted the importance of communication in the field of politics. They won their respective campaigns because they were able to

effectively communicate their messages to millions of people.

Based upon the current trend, Cooper suggested that politicians will need to have a background in public relations as opposed to law, education or economics. According to Cooper, David Cameron embodies a politician who understands the importance of public relations in the field of politics. The number of organisations within the British government that are dedicated to the field of political communication highlights the current drift towards a political arena, which is centred around the art of communication.

This does lead to an intriguing question: as a political leader, is it more important to be an effective communicator or an effective legislator?

If we look at the 2008 Presidential Election Barack Obama was the least experienced candidate for the position.

However, his message of hope, change and the American Dream resonated with Americans far more effectively than if he solely focused upon strategy, policy and efficient governance. More recently, after being re-elected as President of the United States, Barack Obama tweeted a message comprising of three words (15 characters) alongside a photo of him and his wife: 4 More Years. Within hours, 750,000 people from around the world retweeted this message as a symbol of approval and celebration.

While political leaders still need to be thorough and intelligent, they also need to be articulate and charismatic. Today, politicians need to bring their public relations officers and lawyers to the battlefield with them.

This article by Polis intern, Michael Bruton

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