

How to tell development stories – Bill Clinton at LSE

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Clinton at LSE

If all those books about political communications are to be believed then it should be easy to be as effective as Bill Clinton with the help of some speech writers, spin doctors and image consultants. Yet what is remarkable is how few politicians master the art of effortless, instinctive, impactful ([sorry Robert Jay](#)) speech.

Reagan had it by avoiding complexity. George W Bush was even less articulate, but in effect, more able to connect (with his supporters, of course, liberals used his mispeaking as a superficial excuse not to take him seriously). In Britain Ken Livingstone, John Prescott, Boris Johnson and Alan Johnstone are all good examples of those well-versed in the vernacular. Some like Michael Heseltine could soar, while others like Lady Thatcher had drilled themselves into shooting soundbites but never really mastered the intimate dialogue.

So back to Bill.

Watching him talking at LSE about his foundation's work on climate change, obesity, growth, malaria etc reminded me of the ineffable quality of outstanding political narration. We spend a lot of time at Polis trying to work out [how to connect people in the richer more powerful countries with the problems in poorer, less powerful countries](#). We think that communications can build understanding, solidarity and positive interventions. Clinton tells that story from a Western perspective better than anyone I have heard.

"I am always trying to tell people that not burning up the planet makes economic sense – not in 20 years, but now"

Most development narratives either scare you or seek to warm the cockles of your heart. So it's shock stories about millions dying or 'look at how we helped this African farmer escape poverty'. The scare stories are good at raising funds. The happy clappy stories make you feel good about the work that is being done.

Clinton manages to both frighten and affirm, but politically. This seems to be the trick. He does not preach, nor does he proclaim the certainty of what his foundation is doing. (Unlike most NGOs).

"You have to be willing to stop when you're failing"

Instead he talks about the challenges, offers possible narratives of change, and then celebrates the success – not of his foundation – but of the people who have taken forward efficient, self-sustaining routes to empowerment and growth. He happily accepts the limits of what can be done, but insists on the possibility of activism and idealism. I guess, that's easier when you are no longer in office (though he still has power).

This is partly because Clinton is prepared to put his narrative of development through the prism of the market: both the economic market, but also the market of ideas. Unless the social policies can pass the competition test – unless they create wealth as well as welfare, they are not truly sustainable or independent.

Now I am not suggesting that the Clinton Foundation has got the perfect approach. I am simply unqualified to judge the outcomes of what they do. It must be a lot easier when you have a hugely hard-working and charming ex-

President working for you. But my point is that I think he has got the way of articulating the challenge more right than most.

Of course, we can't all be Bill. There are others. I have seen Melinda Gates explain things with a similar clarity. Though she can't do the politics. And I think that is key. You have to acknowledge that development is not engineering. It is a hybrid project of social science, science, economics and, above all, politics. And politics, I insist, is always about communication.

For more on this speech the Twitter hashtag was #LSEClinton

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