



Politics as performance

An introduction: Politics as performance

BBC News Archive Barack Obama

If there is anyone out there

Michael Saward Voiceover

Barack Obama.

BBC News Archive Barack Obama

who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible

Michael Saward Voiceover

Many writers have described him as the greatest orator of his generation

BBC News Archive Barack Obama

– who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time

Michael Saward Voiceover

He's a politician who really knows how to appeal to his audience.

BBC News Archive Barack Obama

- who still questions the power of our democracy

Michael Saward Voiceover

I'm Professor MICHAEL Saward and in this podcast I'll be examining how and why politicians have to perform.

BBC News Archive Barack Obama

– tonight is your answer. (Cheers)

Michael Saward Voiceover

Politics without performance may be no politics at all – just routine administration and backroom deals.

Politicians have to appeal to a wide range of groups. And a good performance – one that looks good, sounds good, is convincing – can be crucial to convey that appeal.

Oscar winning Actor and politician Glenda Jackson believes all the world is a stage for today's political leaders:

Glenda Jackson

Obama clearly struck a chord, not only in America, but around the world. I mean that was something that people had been wanting to hear for a very very long time - the capacity, the ability to connect. And to connect with individuals, even though those individuals are standing in crowds of hundreds of thousands.

Michael Saward Voiceover

We expect our politicians to perform well – even if we complain about the fact that they may sometimes be 'acting'. There's a huge pressure on politicians to be good performers. And, as author Pauline Melville explained to Evan Davies on Radio Four's Today programme recently, there's a long history of politicians being trained.

Pauline Melville & Evan Davis Bbc

Archive Today Programme: 09.04.2010 PM: Margaret Thatcher had voice lessons... People can be taught to mirror their clients' body language, to look empathetic or to have power walking.

ED: Power walking?

PM: Yes walk with confidence to present themselves with confidence. Actually that reminds me of seeing Blair and Bush power walking towards the podium to talk about the Iraq War. You know you wonder if they'd learned-

ED: They'd been taught how to power walk.

PM: Yes.

Michael Saward Voiceover

All this effort put into performing well may reflect the fact that images are now so powerful in our culture now that acting establishes what counts as 'real'. Parliamentary Sketch writer and theatre critic Quentin Letts:

Quentin Letts

The greatest example of acting British politics in the last 100 years or so, Winston Churchill. Those speeches during the war, Britain was really up against it, we were not winning the war at the time, and yet Churchill presented this bulldog character which was very much at odds with his personal character -- he was a drunk, he was a ... he was a difficult tortured, complex man, and yet he presented this image of the bulldog. And that was a wonderful bit of acting; and that was an example about how acting could really help the national cause. So, you know, it's too glib just to say 'acting is bad in politics'. Acting can be essential.

Michael Saward Voiceover

So acting in politics is not lying – it might be, sometimes, but the connection is not that common, and certainly it's not automatic. Politicians have to gather information on issues and to negotiate competing values. They can't do these things if they are totally open about what they think at all times. Not being precise, or not giving everything away at once, is not lying – it is just being careful, being 'politic', often for good reasons. This is not an easy role, and putting on a good performance, one conveying sincerity and authenticity, is crucial to success. Sometimes 'lying' is not knowing. OR NOT KNOWING enough; sometimes it is strategic openness to the future. Sometimes, of course, truth, lies and performance are connected. Performances that try to gloss over or avoid truths are common enough. And who can blame politicians- if they get caught out it can be embarrassing to say the least.

Bill Clinton

I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong. I misled people, including even my wife. I deeply regret that.

Michael Saward Voiceover

President Bill Clinton finally admitting an affair with Monica Lewinsky. In a democracy, politics has to be seen to be done. It has to be performed, staged, scripted. If it wasn't as citizens we might not have a clue what's going on. Democracy needs effective engagement and communication. Quentin Letts:

Quentin Letts

Well I think the problem with this whole issue is that we the voters are terrible hypocrites. We say we don't like actors in our politics, and yet, when the politicians don't act, they don't get so many votes. So we as an electorate have to sort out our attitude to this. And I think the honest answer is that they need to do a bit of acting but they probably have been overdoing it recently.

Michael Saward Voiceover

Performances create democratic politics. Performances create audiences – citizens who pay attention. But can't we have authentic leaders? What is authentic? We shouldn't confuse truthful content with an authentic person.

Authentic can mean a strong sense that they are genuinely grappling with the issues – even if they are 'acting', and even if they are not yet telling us everything.

There is always the frontstage politician on show for the media and the backstage one. Do we really want to collapse the two? Quentin Letts thinks that sometimes being a good performer will never be enough.

Quentin Letts

If you get the policy right, then you've got to find the personality and the promotional skills to punt it up field. So you've got to have the base camp of the policy and you've got to have worked out your philosophy. A great performance without that policy is absolutely pointless. Paddy Ashdown was in some respects a really good performer, politically. He was good at sound bites; he looked good; ex-Army man, he had a great back story; had hopeless policies and it was never going to work.

Michael Saward Voiceover

Perhaps as voters we're accepting stage managed politics and we want good, justified performances. Glenda Jackson agrees.

Glenda Jackson

I do sometimes sit and fulminate when I'm watching either PMQs or questions to Ministers, MPs stand up and they haven't rehearsed their question, and there's a kind of lot of humming and ahing and taking ages to get to the point.

Michael Saward Voiceover

So what is a citizen to do? Quentin Letts thinks we the voters should become critics of the political theatre.

Quentin Letts

We're now pretty sophisticated about the way that we look at politics. If we look at a TV debate, we know that they've all been prepping like made; we know that they're trying not to make a mistake. If we look at political events on television, we know that there is a certain amount of fraudery involved, and yet we somehow discount that and we buy into it because we realise that they've got to have some way of establishing their platform.

Michael Saward Voiceover

As citizens we need to judge those political performances that are timely and justified, and those that are not. It's not about getting upset because politicians act. It's about how justified that act is, and who and what it is aimed at.

Ian Willox Voiceover

Performing Politics was an Open Politics podcast produced by the Open University.

You can watch the accompanying video or listen to more politics podcasts at www.open2.net/politics