

John Gaffney

The Language of Political Leadership in Contemporary Britain



**THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP
IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN**

Also by John Gaffney

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For Deborah

'You don't have to do that to me, my dear – I'm only in politics.'

Margaret Thatcher to a curtsying shop assistant.

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Foreword

The origins of this book lie in my research in French politics. While researching for my book, *The French Left and the Fifth Republic: the Discourses of Communism and Socialism in Contemporary France* (Macmillan, 1989), it became clear to me that the presidentialism of the regime and the media's preoccupation with personalities were insufficient explanations for the strong personalisation of contemporary politics; both the institutions and the media are influential, but the personalisation of politics is a highly complex phenomenon, and is in a subtle relationship with political tradition, and many of the ideas and myths underpinning a society. In the present study, I have analysed four leadership speeches in Britain in order to show how politics is depicted by leaders (and vice versa) in a non-presidential polity where the cult of the heroic individual is not strong, and where, until the 1980s, collective leadership, whether in the Cabinet, in Parliament or in the political parties, was the norm. The party conference is the moment of political life when leaders face their party and the public simultaneously. The leader's conference speech is, therefore, revealing of both the constraints upon and possibilities for the national presentation of personalised political leadership in Britain.

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John Gaffney

1 Introduction

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND BRITISH POLITICAL CULTURE

It is a generally-held belief that politics and politicians are afforded a low measure of public esteem.¹ Opinion polls suggest that a majority of the population take the view that there is too much television airtime devoted to politics, especially at election or party conference times, with party political broadcasts often registering (since they now no longer go out simultaneously on all networks) a change of TV channel. The letter columns of the newspapers frequently contain criticism (and almost never praise) of political leaders, criticism which ranges from the morally indignant in the serious press to the venomous in the tabloids. Even more apparently unpopular than politicians are political parties themselves. In the late 1960s, the unpopularity of Harold Wilson and, to a lesser extent, Ted Heath, was caricatural. In the early 1980s, Michael Foot, as Labour Party leader, bore the brunt of public hostility and, on occasions, ridicule. Margaret Thatcher, one of the most successful leaders in the political history of the United Kingdom, has suffered the label 'the most unpopular British Prime Minister ever'. Mrs Thatcher, however, like Harold Wilson before her, has been variously, and at times simultaneously, not only the least liked of politicians but also the most admired. And it is unquestionable that the political success of British Conservatism in the 1980s owes much to this 'most unpopular Prime Minister', and, arguably, something to that very unpopularity. Moreover, in conjunction with their apparent unpopularity, all British political leaders and many second-rank figures such as Edwina Currie, Ken Livingstone, Norman Tebbit, and Arthur Scargill are nationally very well-known, and the pronouncements and lives (especially private lives) of politicians have often elevated their status and fame to that enjoyed by non-political national media personalities. Many politicians are household names along with pop-singers, soap opera characters, and members of the royal family.