

SAN DIEGO
CITYBEAT

Speech of a Lunchtime

9/8/2009

By John R. Lamb

Spin Cycle loves a good speech. As for bad speeches, well, let's just say I'm a tad more forgiving than George Orwell.

Orwell, the status-quo-rattling British author famous for his classics 1984 and Animal Farm, also had a few thoughts about political language, which, he wrote "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

He also warned—in 1946, no less—that "the great enemy of clear language is insincerity" and that political discourse is unavoidable. "All issues are political issues," he huffed, "and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia."

But take heart. Orwell held out hope that the "slovenliness of our language" could be reversed, and certainly since then history has been blessed with a scattering of memorable speeches oozing inspiration, from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and "I've Been to the Mountaintop" sermons to John F. Kennedy's inaugural address challenging the country to dream big and reach for the moon.

And certainly the right-wing spasms elicited by President Barack Obama's alleged "indoctrination" speech to school kids ("What you're learning in school today will determine whether we as a nation can meet our greatest challenges in the future." Eeeeeek! Head for the hills!) show how a speech can become a motivating force still for good or ill. So, when the San Diego County Taxpayers Association recently announced that Mayor Jerry Sanders would be delivering "an important address" at its Tuesday, Sept. 15, luncheon on the topic of "building for the future despite the economic downturn," well, Spin Cycle admittedly felt a tingle.

Aware that this speech would occur during a down week for Spin Cycle, it became apparent that a bit of advance work was called for. Checking in with the mayor's office for a few more details on this "important" speech produced only a downplaying of the event (he spoke at a similar lunch last year) and a reiteration that Sanders "will focus on his priorities and how we'll continue to move forward as a city in the midst of a down economy."

Spin Cycle mulled briefly the possibility of writing a speech of his own liking.

"A pension in every pot! And pot in every..."—no, Spin Cycle's not going there. And after all, Sanders has a crack staff of wordsmiths now (a couple that even haven't worked at the Union-Tribune!), led by the indomitable penmanship of Gerry Braun, which I just accidentally typed as "Gerry Brain." Oh, how subliminal.

No, Spin Cycle is fairly certain that for this "important" speech, the words will flow into

sentences, then cluster into paragraphs, and from that a speech indeed will be born.

But what words will be chosen, and will they avoid the meaninglessness Orwell decried as “gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug”?

Spin Cycle set out in search of what those words should be. Reaching out to 15 local movers and shakers to gauge what they’d like to hear from our strong mayor in this Great Time of Uncertainty, Spin Cycle heard back from a handful.

(Lesson about most San Diego movers and shakers: They take their holiday revelries very seriously—or at least well out of cell-phone range. Who knew?)

Erik Bruvold, who heads up the Institute for Policy Research now associated with National University, took time away from prepping for a huge neighborhood barbeque to say he wants to hear from the mayor “a sustainable and realistic plan for how to close a \$100 million to \$200 million deficit. I really don’t want to hear that much about grand civic plans or investments.”

With the level of sacrifice expected in the city’s coming fiscal budget, Bruvold said it is “critical” for the mayor to “begin the process of laying out just how bad it could be and what we need to do to close the gap.”

Bruvold, however, added that he doesn’t expect to hear much of that. “Instead, I am sure we are going to hear about the [Downtown] library, City Hall, the Chargers, and the convention center [expansion] and how they are critical to keeping the economy going and that we can do those projects even in a down time—indeed that they must be done now to speed recovery.”

That, he argued, reflects “pretty flawed economic thinking.”

Not necessarily so, countered Donald Cohen. Once labeled by the U-T as the “Voice for the Poor,” Cohen is president and co-founder of the Center on Policy Initiatives, the local union-affiliated think tank.

“I do think there is an opportunity in bad times to be bold,” Cohen told Spin Cycle. “We have an enormous opportunity here in San Diego.”

Get Cohen going, and he’s off in a dream world where San Diego rules as the greenest city in the nation, where major civic projects and infrastructure upgrading puts thousands of people back to work and creates “the foundation for a much better future.”

Add to that, Cohen said, the mayor’s final-term status and apparent lack of desire to run for higher office, and “it’s an opportunity here he’s got that we won’t have potentially for another six or seven years, in terms of political cycle. So he could do whatever the hell he wants, and it’s gonna be fine because he’s not running for re-election.”

Others who responded had more specific requests.

Lani Lutar, who heads the speech-hosting taxpayers association, said she wants to know how the city confronts challenges like the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant and its permit status, the 2010 budget and, “of course,” the convention center. (Lutar was the lone dissenter on the mayor’s task force that endorsed expanding the center but offered no financing plan.)

“Show me the money!” Lutar demanded. “How are we going to pay for everything?”

Diane Takvorian of the Environmental Health Coalition would like Sanders to emphasize reducing greenhouse gases in San Diego through energy-efficiency retrofits, which she called the true “big, big project” of our time that would benefit all San Diegans, rich and poor.

At least let’s hope the mayor, who travels to Washington, D.C., this week, has more encouraging words than offered by local tax-battler extraordinaire Richard Rider: “Just returned from East Coast. Backed up. Can’t help this time.”