

The Vapidity Translator

by Bradford Tuckfield (December 2016)



I was struck recently by a passage by Theodore Dalrymple in the *Salisbury Review*, in which he proposed a simple test for vapidity in political speech:

“One method of deciding whether or not an utterance is a cliché is to enquire whether anyone would assent to its negation. For example, Mrs May intoned in her speech that she wanted a Britain in which everyone played by the same rules with every appearance of belief that she was actually saying something; but would anyone declare that he wanted a Britain in which people played by different rules, as in a return to a feudal state?

Or again, when she said that she wanted a Britain in which everyone had the opportunity to be everything they (sic) could be, would anyone say that, to the contrary, that he wanted a Britain in which only a small handful of people had the opportunity be all they (sic) could be, and the rest could go to the devil?”

That Mrs. May would find it useful to utter such platitudes is unsurprising: since politics is about winning over a majority, making empty statements to which everyone assents would seem to be a reasonable strategy. By presenting these clichés as thoughtful policy ideas, she implies that public policy is a

choice between good (a level playing field) versus evil (an oppressive feudal state), and that she is on the side of good.

But in a civilized political setting, politics is not a choice between good things and evil things, but rather between competing or contradictory good things. One politician may say "I am for free speech," and another may say "I am against bullying," and it is unlikely that any Westerner would admit to disagreeing with either of these statements. However, the challenge of public policy is not to assent to general principles, but to make the difficult decision of which principle we value more when they are in conflict.

If we are gripped by a pro-free-speech fervor and write a law that says "anyone can say anything," then we give free rein to bullies to say nasty things to their peers. If we are consumed by spite for bullies and write a law that says "no one can ever say anything that can be construed as bullying," then we have struck a blow against free speech, and some innocent people will be punished alongside the real bullies just for expressing themselves. Writing laws is difficult because we must sacrifice a little of one principle in favor of the other, and it is never clear which to sacrifice, or how much, or when.

How remarkable would it be if one of our political leaders were willing to make voluntary, honest statements about his positions on these sacrifices! What if there were a campaign speech that made some statements like the following:

- "I am willing to abridge people's free speech rights in order to prevent bullying."
- "I am willing to allow some bullying in order to protect free speech rights."
- "I am willing to allow a few murders in order to prevent many people from feeling harassed during stop-and-frisk pat-downs."
- "I am willing to allow many people to feel harassed and humiliated in public pat-downs in order to prevent a few murders."
- "I am willing to make it harder for entrepreneurs to start a business in order to bring in higher tax revenues for the state."
- "I am willing to decrease state revenues, and thereby defund some

government programs, in order to make it easier to start a business.”

People seem to unconsciously think of politics as a grab-bag of positive things to be handed out. They seem to think that simply by liking free speech and disliking bullying, we can have an unlimited amount of the former and none of the latter. However, we must understand that there are consequences, intended and unintended, in every policy choice. Every silver lining of a policy that sounds good, has a cloud of negative consequences in other domains. Any thoughtful person can recognize these consequences, but it is exceedingly rare to see any politician admit that they exist or that he is willing to allow them.

Because of the overwhelming vapidness of political speech today, I (playfully) propose the development and deployment of a “vapidness translator.” This translator would take the vapid statements of politicians and translate them to content-heavy and thoughtful, sober ideas. In its mature form, it could be a sophisticated technology based on state-of-the-art machine learning algorithms and natural language processing methods. Here, I will only outline some of its basic functionality.

Consider one example of what my proposed vapidness translator might look like in action:

Original statement: “we need ... immediate efforts to create jobs and provide relief to families that are watching their paychecks shrink and their life savings disappear.” (from President Obama, in his first press conference as president-elect in 2008)

Possible translation: “I am willing to have the state coercively take more money from middle-class families in order to increase government welfare payments to the poor. I am willing to increase taxpayer-funded spending on symbolic but inefficient programs.”

The original statement says that we should help people who have money problems. This is a reasonable statement, and depending on how it is interpreted, no one should assent to its negation. Thus, it fails Dalrymple’s vapidness test. Of course, the important and unaddressed question is how we should help the poor. An advocate of free markets might think that to “create jobs” as the original statement says, we should lower taxes and decrease regulatory burdens, and let the market itself create the new jobs.

In hindsight, this is not what Pres. Obama meant. He meant that the government itself would fund infrastructure programs and its own agenda of investments, including its failed half-billion dollar investment in now-bankrupt energy company Solyndra. Investing in a “green” company like Solyndra may have looked good politically or symbolically, but it was ill-conceived and inefficient. This is not a fluke – government investment is almost always inefficient and wasteful, and a non-vapid advocacy of it in a political speech should mention this fact.

Pres. Obama mentioned that we should “provide relief” to the poor. This is also a vapid statement, since no one would seriously argue that no relief should be given by anyone to some of those who truly need it. Again, the difficult policy choice lies in what role the state will have in providing relief, and how it will execute that role. Libertarians may think that relief for the poor should be provided through private charitable organizations. This was not Pres. Obama’s plan – he meant to advocate relief provided through the continually expanding federal welfare bureaucracy.

But increased welfare payments are not a free lunch. They must be funded somehow, and of course they are funded by taxation. The poor who are recipients of the welfare payments in question could not by definition fund redistributive payments to themselves. Because of our nearly incomprehensible tax code, the wealthy are able to hire clever accountants to find ingenious ways to legally avoid increased taxation. So, the increased tax burden tends to fall squarely on the shoulders of the middle class. Of course, these taxes are not voluntary, and are extracted coercively and by force if necessary. The innocuous-sounding proposal to “provide relief” thus carries with it an implicit proposal to further squeeze the middle class, and the vapid translator identifies and expresses this.

It is not unheard-of to sincerely advocate increased wealth transfers from the middle classes to the poor, even coercive or inefficient ones. However, if a politician means to argue that these negative consequences are worth it for the greater good, he should have the courage and honesty to say so. To make a vague reference to the need to create jobs and provide relief without mentioning these consequences or acknowledging a willingness to face them may be politically expedient but it is subtly harmful to our public discourse.

The philosopher Roger Scruton has spoken in public about the presence and growth of corruption in our culture. One of the ways that a culture can be corrupt, according to Scruton, is by allowing and encourage fakery and fakes. Vapid political statements individually do little harm and may help politicians to win votes. However, taken together, the emptiness of our political discourse is a problem. It means that policy makers and the public are not thinking seriously about the inevitable negative consequences of every choice, or of the sacrifices that are necessary for any platform. The fakeness of an empty political speech, and the frequent fakeness of the politicians giving the speeches, tend to corrupt our culture by eliminating serious and sober political discussion. It reduces politics to a good-vs.-evil, us-vs.-them caricature of itself rather than the careful and cooperative navigation of possibilities between extremes that it is.

The fight against vapidness will not be won by a state or an army. Each individual must be constantly wary of political platitudes, and protest them vehemently where they exist. We should applaud and support politicians who can be honest about what they value and what they are willing to sacrifice. We should never punish a politician for this type of honesty, even if it makes their platform seem a little less exciting.

Finally, politics affects the people, but it also reflects them. If our politicians are vapid crooks, then maybe we are collectively a little vapid or a little crooked ourselves. We should try to improve ourselves, to become more honest, to become more thoughtful and reflective, and to make our communications a little less empty. There is no indication that we will ever be able to create a utopia where there are no empty-headed or criminal-minded politicians. But we can improve ourselves and our societies a little bit at a time. In the meantime, try some vapidness translations of your own, not only to understand political platforms better, but also to alleviate some of the intense boredom that comes from listening to the empty political speeches we are constantly subjected to.

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