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Political speeches and the illusion of perfect pitch

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Abstract
Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott’s speechifying at the opening of the Australian War memorial’s Afghanistan Gallery has been reported as a kind of momentary cease-fire between the rival leaders. But it was unmistakably part of the election campaign.

I happened to catch it live on ABC News 24.

Like any ceremony that marks Australian military involvement in America’s wars on terror it was a fundamentally dishonest display hyping “our” sacrifice with barely a mention of the horrific sacrifices of the Afghan civilians. That aside it was instructive.

Mostly it showed quite clearly why Kevin Rudd is popular and Tony Abbott isn’t.

Rudd speaks to his audience. Abbott reads to them.

Rudd stumbles and engages in folksy references. Abbott quotes Dr Johnson.

Rudd looked moved. Abbot looked awkward.

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Again and again Rudd made it personal: when he was in Afghanistan, when he was a ten year old visiting the memorial, what a soldier said to him.

The PM displayed perfect pitch as a political leader, he moved skillfully from the personal to carefully prepared ritualistic phrases:

“I’ve never tired of coming to this place since I first came here as a ten year old in short pants on our first visit from Queensland. Whether you are religious or not, this has become, for many Australians, a holy place. It is in many respects a cathedral of our nation’s memory.”

I think it is Rudd’s ability to move like this, from personal claims to claims for the nation, that stamps him as “Prime Ministerial” and gives him that edge in the preferred PM polls. He speaks to “us” as one of “us” and yet he never lets us forget that he is Prime Minister speaking for the nation.

At times he paused and seemed to be collecting his thoughts before continuing, almost as if he was about to stumble, then he would continue.

I once went to a seminar given by a visiting expert on teaching and learning who advised us to do something similar. He said that when lecturing he often pauses and scratches his head as if trying to come up with an appropriate example. He then proceeds to use one he had prepared earlier. He called it creating the illusion of “teaching live”.