

THE POWER OF METAPHOR

(Taken from "*The Language of Politics*" Adrian Beard (2000), chapter on *The power of metaphor*)

The power of metaphor

Seminal work in semantics in English has investigated the place of metaphor in everyday speech (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphor is deeply embedded in the way we construct the world around us and the way that world is constructed for us by others. An example of this process involves the metaphorical idea that a lesson is a journey: we take a difficult topic 'step by step'; if we cannot conclude an idea we 'go round in circles'; if we lose relevance we 'go off in the wrong direction'; if we are successful in understanding we 'arrive at a conclusion'; if we are unsuccessful we are 'lost' or 'stuck'.

Two traditional sources of metaphor in politics are sport and war, both of which involve physical contests of some sort. Both politicians themselves, and those who report politics, use these metaphors. Boxing metaphors are particularly common, conveying a sense of toughness and aggression, especially when an election is seen as a fight between two main protagonists who are nearly always male. When the British Election of 1997 was announced, one newspaper had the headline 'The Gloves Are Off, suggesting not just boxing, but a bare-knuckle fight.

In the USA, baseball metaphors abound in politics: 'a whole new ball game', 'a ball park figure', 'to play ball', to be 'back at first base' and 'spin' (see below). These metaphors are increasingly used in British political discourse too, but baseball's equivalent game, cricket, offers others: 'to keep your eye on the ball'; 'batting on a sticky wicket'; to be 'stumped' by or to 'play a straight bat' to a question.

When Blair's supporters in 1997 wanted to suggest that if he won, his government would act promptly on issues, they used a metaphor taken from warfare and promised to 'hit the ground running'. This phrase originates in the idea of soldiers leaping from combat helicopters and running straight into action.

It is worth noting that this sense of politics being seen as a sort of warfare through the use of metaphors can be seen in reverse when real war is talked about. The shadow boxing of party politics, with its metaphors of battle, becomes much less gung-ho when real victims in real wars are to be explained. In the 1990s dead civilians became 'collateral damage' in a form of political language which wanted to hide the horror, while the mass evacuation (and often murder) of civilians belonging to the other side became 'ethnic cleansing'.

Gibbs (1994) points out that metaphors from sport and war are 'not just rhetorical devices for talking about politics, for they exemplify how people ordinarily conceive of politics ... for instance metaphors from sports and war often delude people into believing that negotiation and compromise are forbidden by the rules.' In other words, because so much language which surrounds political issues is rooted in metaphors of war, contest or sport - even if we are not always consciously aware of these roots - then we have no idea that politics can be anything other than confrontational, that it could in fact involve agreement and consensus. The key metaphors of politics involve concepts of enemies and opponents, winners and losers; they do not suggest that government could be achieved through discussion, co-operation and working together.

Questions: Discuss the following questions with your colleagues

1. What is the role of metaphor in our thinking?
2. What are two common sources of conceptual metaphor in politics? Are there any cultural differences?
3. What example from Tony Blair's 1997 campaigning is provided in the text? What is the conceptual metaphor? What image does this particular use of metaphor evoke?
4. What happens with traditional use of metaphors in political discourse when a real war takes place? What is strategic about this use?
5. What is the power of metaphor?