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Friends, Romans, chardonnay swill!

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It often seems that the speech, once the principal currency of public life, is losing the contest for popular attention with lesser forms of communication – the doorstep, the media grab, the press release and the attack ad.

Only rarely are substantial extracts of speeches printed in our newspapers. The days are long gone when an ambitious activist or trade unionist would spend his or her time speaking in Sydney's Domain or at Melbourne's Eastern Market – where a young John Curtin first made his name. The elegance with which Sir Robert Menzies dispatched his luckless interjectors is seldom glimpsed in today's parliaments. H.V. Evatt's barnstorming campaign against the banning of the Communist Party, delivered via speeches in towns and cities across the country, now seems as old-fashioned as musk sticks or marbles.

Yet for all this, the speech endures. The general level of background noise has increased, but the single note of a good speech can penetrate it. Joe Frost, the twenty year old survivor of the second Bali bombing, showed this last month when he asked some powerful questions of the congregation at a Newcastle memorial service. 'Why did this happen?', he asked through tears. 'Apparently it's about religion. But we were eating dinner on the beach with our friends and families. Who does that offend? Who doesn't eat dinner with family and friends? It's the most common thing in the world.'

There is still no better way to make your arguments and tell your story – no better way to convict a criminal, defend an innocent, prosecute a cause or toast your gran's birthday – than with a speech.

True, a dreary speech is probably given every single minute of the day. Plant yourself in the public gallery of one of our parliaments on an average sitting day and you will hear more chinless rhetoric than you can bear. No meeting seems complete now without a PowerPoint presentation. Well, a PowerPoint slide never changed anyone's life, except maybe for the worse. Speeches change people's lives – today as much as ever.

Menzies' moving talk about Sir Winston Churchill, broadcast by the BBC from the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral after the great man's funeral in 1965, fairly crackled with emotion and memory. Yet it was matched by more recent speeches of remembrance: Paul Keating's remarkable speech at the interment of the Unknown Soldier at the Australian War Memorial; Richie Benaud's eulogy for Sir Donald Bradman, delivered on a rainy, blowy day in Adelaide; Bob Carr's short tribute to the victims of the first Bali bombing, before a crowd of locals sitting on Coogee Oval.

In 1911 suffragette Vida Goldstein gave a rousing speech at the Royal Albert Hall in London, urging the Brits to follow our lead in awarding women the right to vote. 'I know that you will soon be citizens of no mean country', she concluded. But no less affecting was the inaugural speech given nearly a century later by Linda Burney, the first Aboriginal member of the NSW Parliament, which described what it was like to grow up Indigenous.

The republic debate in the 1990s may not have caused constitutional change but it produced some very fine words. Tom Keneally asserted that 'it is time we ceased to divide our souls.' Robert Hughes greeted his audience at a public meeting in 1996 with the salutation: 'Welcome, fellow chardonnay-swilling elitists!' Tony Abbott replied a few years later that republicanism had become a form of 'constitutional Viagra.'

Sometimes, though, big national moments produce speeches that are overcooked rather than well done. Often they are burdened with ambitions beyond the speech's capacity, like transporting an elephant on top of a Mini.

Sometimes the speeches that really blow your hair back – the speeches you would want to read aloud to your kids or your class or, in extremis, your cat – are smaller affairs. Andrew Denton gave a knee-slapper in 1994 about the then Australian cricket captain Allan Border that reinforced why Border is exactly the kind of man you'd want with you in the trenches – especially if you could squeeze in a few quick overs while you were down there. 'I worship the very protector he sweats in', Denton commented.

Denton and his contemporaries remind us that good public language is not dead – and that great speeches are not only delivered in a Churchillian growl or a Kennedyesque brogue, but in an Australian drawl as well.

Michael Fullilove is the editor of *'Men and Women of Australia! Our Greatest Modern Speeches* (Vintage), released on Monday.