



The English Speaking Union – Queensland Branch

The 2006 Churchill Lecture

“Palma Rosa”

Wednesday, 14 June 2006, 6pm

The Hon Paul de Jersey AC
Chief Justice

It is a great honour to be given the opportunity to deliver this address. It is also a great challenge: everything which could conceivably be said or thought about Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill has already been expressed countless times over. Nevertheless, it is topical to revisit his greatness when, in terms of my topic, “the English Speaking Peoples of today” confront major “problems, perils and challenges”.

When as Prime Minister Churchill addressed Parliament on 13 May 1940, he described the German threat as “a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime”. One may speculate where he would rank the contemporary threat of terrorism with its spasmodic, though catastrophic, eruptions. There is little doubt he would have applauded Britain’s assuming a prominent lead in repelling the present day threat. The current day intelligence alliance between the United Kingdom and the United States owes its roots to the unique relationship Churchill developed with Franklin D Roosevelt.

Yet unlike Churchill, modern world leaders have been patchy in rallying public support for distant military operations. Then again, some have criticized Churchill, I believe unfairly, for being unduly yielding to Roosevelt, reminiscent of things said in recent times of leaders including our own. Churchill’s great achievement, I venture, was keeping the British people united in the critical interval between May 1940 and June 1941. How? His own explanation was: “I displayed the smiling confidence and confident air which I thought suitable when things are very bad.” (“The Second World War”, Vol 2 Chap 7). I am not necessarily sure that would work today, even if the face be Churchill’s.

But Churchill thereby obviously downplayed his approach. A keener acknowledgement is that he did indeed expend the “blood, toil, tears and sweat” which, in that 1940 speech, he



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claimed was all he could offer. Even the speeches of Churchill are not, by the way, immune from editing. His expression “blood, toil, tears and sweat” is most often rendered as “blood, sweat and tears”, although that has rather pedantically been justified on the basis “toil” and “sweat” are redundant (W Safire: “Lend me your ears, Great Speeches in History”, Norton, 1992, p 134).

Countless attempts have been made, with varying persuasiveness, to distil the essence of Churchill’s greatness, and one wonders whether there is any real point to the exercise. Churchill was unique in the true sense of that word, and the prospect of identifying his essential quality, if to facilitate emulation, is fanciful. I do not think we can usefully pass beyond an adumbration of Winston Churchill as simply this: an extraordinary historical phenomenon.

The difficulties of synthesizing Churchill’s essence – putting aside whether there is any utility in doing so, is remarkable in that we do know so much about the man. His was not an era of investigative, often better described as intrusive journalism, let alone “blogging”, and remember that the televising of the Queen’s Coronation on 2 June 1952 was then a novelty. It is his prolific writings which tell us so much about him, and they include the fascinating, highly personal indeed intimate material collected by Mary Soames in her work published in 1998, “Speaking for Themselves: The Personal Letters of Winston and Clementine Churchill”.

Three or four years ago, the BBC conducted a poll to identify the 100 greatest Britons of all time. Churchill unsurprisingly topped it. Some related findings were concerning. In terms of cultural contribution, Boy George and Robbie Williams outpolled Turner and Keats, and David Beckham and Sir Cliff Richard outran Constable and Wordsworth (“The Times”, September 2002). An obsession with celebrity is denying people an appreciation of the value of great personal achievement. It is as if we want our celebrities to shine, but only for a time and then move on making way for new faces: the displaced may return, but preferably only if responsible for some salacious aftermath. Against that rather dismal



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trend, we would nevertheless unhesitatingly characterize Churchill’s greatness, his heroism, as truly enduring if not timeless.

I recall, as a 16 year old, being deeply moved by what I saw and read of Churchill’s passing on 24 January 1965, at the age of 90, and his State funeral six days later. As to his passing, the historian Professor Geoffrey Best, in his biography “Churchill a study in greatness” (Penguin, 2001), records (p 325) that “the last coherent words (Churchill) spoke to anyone of his family were, thought Mary Soames, to her husband when the latter hopefully suggested a glass of champagne: “Winston looked at him vaguely. ‘I’m so bored with it all’, he said.” He was ready (and entitled) to go. As to the funeral, State funerals were normally reserved for royalty, and Queen Elizabeth made the unprecedented gesture of taking her seat in St Paul’s Cathedral before the arrival of the coffin. Big Ben was silenced for the day.

Australia reacted by lionizing Churchill as a “secular saint”. The magnitude of the homage was not unheralded. Certainly from the time of his second prime ministership in 1951, leading to his 80th birthday three days later and his travelling exhibition in 1957, Australian reaction to the great man was almost invariably laudatory, as well epitomized in the Menzies line: “The greatest privilege in life is to meet and know and talk with an immortal” – interesting bearing in mind that Churchill was agnostic.

As to his artistic endeavours, it is interesting in this country in post Pro Hart times, to note Churchill’s representation in major national galleries around the world. The general view is that he was not a great artist, although judged to have been competent. No doubt his celebrity informed the interested galleries in displaying his works.

He was a hero who never visited Australia, despite numerous entreaties. Yet Churchill is daily remembered here, if at a rather pedestrian level, through the naming of streets, where he outshines all Australian politicians and is apparently surpassed only by Sir Donald Bradman and Sir John Monash (John Ramsden: Man of the century, Winston



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Churchill and his legends since 1945: 2002, Harper Collins, p 475). This city of Brisbane boasts 11 Churchill streets and there are 14 elsewhere in the State of Queensland.

And he is to this day enthusiastically celebrated by our Prime Minister – who bears one of his names, and whose immediate predecessor Paul Keating acknowledged Churchill as the inspiring force which led him into public life.

Bearing in mind that Churchill was entirely indifferent to our “national game” of cricket (Ramsden p 438), the Australian homage is you may feel particularly remarkable. The uniquely beneficial leadership he provided during World War 2, and in presaging the Cold War, overwhelmingly dispels other less favourable considerations, like his committing Australian troops to doomed military campaigns and his sometimes insensitive reference to “the colonies”. On one view expressed in England, the only victory about Gallipoli was the masterfully executed evacuation (Best, p 67). And in the interests of objectivity, mention should probably be made also of Churchill’s disparaging reference to antipodeans, post-1942, as of “bad stock” (Best, p 107). Those negative aspects aside, the balance is extraordinarily positive. His great radio speeches alone stand as peerless clarion calls, including for the young.

It is pardonable, at a celebratory event like this, to acknowledge that Churchill was a great lover of champagne. Substantial consumption destroys the brain power of most of us. It seems to have enhanced his. Maybe it fed his imagination to believe in himself, and the confidence and courage to stand up to the forces of darkness, capacities which led to his saying “no” loudly and clearly when the craven would have capitulated: to Kitchener, Lloyd George, Chamberlain, Hitler, Stalin, de Gaulle...

Great hero he was, and is, and ever will be while people retain the capacity to read and think. But his heroism and greatness, it must be said, were of the most unlikely kind.



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In the first place, as to education, Churchill was effectively self-educated, a listless student largely enthused in that respect by his American mother. He was bullied at school, and regularly disciplined in the early years, unreasonably it seems, by the Reverend Herbert Sneyd-Kinnersley, the headmaster of St George’s School at Ascot. But Churchill’s later drive produced an extraordinarily well read person with an acute perception of history – not to mention a myriad of other accomplishments.

Secondly, at least in egalitarian Australian terms, Churchill was, we may sense uncomfortably, rather given to self-promotion, perhaps unpredictable given his aristocratic lineage. As an early example, witness his determination to keep the British people aware of his activities as war correspondent during the Boer War; and Arthur Balfour’s possibly uncharitable characterization of Churchill’s publication, “The World Crisis”, as “an autobiography disguised as a history of the universe”.

Then, as to Churchill’s contrariness, not a regular feature of the truly heroic, there are the contradictions. For example, while plainly fascinated and enthralled by war, he was repelled by its barbarism. He referred to it as a “vile and wicked folly”. Then again, while he was plainly the valorous saviour of a nation, even an empire imperilled by a savage foe, he had the time to bemoan the extent to which “sons of the working classes” were overrepresented in prison.

Churchill’s unique heroism and greatness were not borne of predictable origins. Most would trace the presence of such qualities to the family, or to God.

As to God, there was in Churchill no embrace of the Gospels. Churchill was in fact agnostic. His enduring faith rested, frankly, in himself and whatever was necessary to support him, essentially King and country, but nothing really of God in our professedly spiritual 21st century sense.



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As to his family, he appears to have given Clementine virtually only what was left over after the satisfaction of what he saw as more pressing concerns. That is not to deny his love for her, dramatically evident from their correspondence so wonderfully disclosed to us by Mary Soames. But while Clementine was fairly obviously his irreplaceable mainstay, one is left with the impression she was, not to put too fine a point on it, rather “used” by Winston. The doubt is fed early on by his purchase of “Chartwell” in 1922 without consulting her, which Mary Soames calls “the only issue over which Clementine felt Winston had acted with less than candour towards her”. It was of course a remarkable marriage, so remarkably complicated as to defy analysis, and especially for her “suffering” him. And then there is the sad decline of all their children other than Mary – though, again, Churchill is said to have been a loving and affectionate father.

What explains his capacity to bind a nation riven by distress? – for, as I have suggested, that was, ultimately, his distinct capacity. Professor Best says (p 185), presciently of the year 2006, that “we have seen...recently in Vietnam and Afghanistan what can happen even to a military superpower when its people become divided about the merits of a war and begin to think the cost of it too high”. For Professor Best it was Churchill’s capacity to portray to Britons as they believed they were, “a valiant and valuable people and nation” (p 187). They were the “English Speaking Peoples” of whom Churchill was himself the “Great (and proud) Commoner”.

Mind you, as Best also reminds us, the Edwardian grandee, the high Tory, was not necessarily always completely in touch. He refers to public discomfort about post-war rationing in 1951, and says (p 305):

“Churchill’s imaginative empathy with the lives of the poor and ordinary was at its most sensitive in respect of food rationing, but his privileged existence and self-indulgent habits kept him from understanding much about the matter. Harold McMillan recalled how, when Churchill returned to number 10, he demanded to be shown what a single adult’s food ration amounted to. A week’s rations were accordingly set out on a tray for his inspection. What’s wrong with that, he asked; you could get a good meal out of that.”



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Churchill’s heroism is not explained by upbringing; by family; by spirituality...neither is it explained by his collegial milieu. He was ever, curiously, a hero past his use-by date, the “leader” to be suffered rather, in the desperate hope of the success which could not be assured by others.

And so I must rest with the conclusion advanced at the outset, that the Churchillian genius defies analytical definition, and that to embark upon analysis is essentially pointless.

His greatness is not susceptible of deconstruction, and its uniqueness is paralleled by his eccentricity.

That feature makes it not only interesting, but also in some respects entertaining. There are countless examples, ranging from the odd hours he kept, through the theatricality of his public performances, even to his dress. His stolid minders doubted his signature V-sign for its being reproduced the wrong way around. He was an ideas man. Lord Alanbrooke said that “Winston had 10 ideas every day, only one of which was good, and we did not know which it was” (Best, p 196). The innovative PM’s weaponry department within the Ministry of Defence was known as “Churchill’s Toyshop”. He was accepted as a “privileged eccentric” (Best, p 186). As A J P Taylor recorded, “he wore a Victorian frock-coat and more often an extremely practical siren suit reminiscent of a child’s ‘rompers’.” (Best, p 166)

Thus my conclusion that it is impossible to distil the essence of Churchill, and pointless trying to do so. It is enough to recognize him as a unique historical phenomenon, apt to “market” the legitimacy and point of a war nobody wanted; apt to rely successfully on true coalition governments, crossing political divides, to deliver markedly effective executive rule; apt to harness, unequivocally, vast public support, these days long sought after but, if given, generally secured only rather grudgingly.



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Non-heroes cannot begin to fathom true heroes, but that does not mean that they are not impressed and encouraged by the heroic example. In the case of Sir Winston Churchill, that will, I believe, and indefinitely, be the experience of all open-minded peoples of this world, and not just those who speak English.