The small slabs of crude election soundbites, with extra ornamentation in the form of half-true and meaningless headline statistics, clunk across the airwaves, and we grimace. The dead prose reaches us upward ten times a day – “an economy that works for all”, “the many and not the few”, “work is the way out of poverty”, “more being spent on our schools than ever before”, “the NHS is treating more patients than ever before”, “fastest growth rate in Europe”, “the national interest”, “the most important election in my lifetime” – and yes, let’s hear it for “strong and stable leadership”.

On 30 April, Andrew Marr tried a little witty and civilised pre-emptive mocking to stop Theresa May using soundbites in his interview with her, but it did not work because it could not work. Embarrassment about clichés and almost idiotic numbers is not what democratic politicians worry about at election time. Many of us may pine for the old American game-show device – where, for failing to amuse and divert the audience, contestants are removed from the fray by a man hammering a gong – but that is not on offer and, in election mode, the politicians will do as they have long learned to do. They will listen to the Lynton Crosbys and Seumas Milnes of this world and plough on – and on.

The soundbites are largely vacuous and we are more noisily sardonic about them than three decades ago (hooray for media literacy) but they aren’t worse than normal. There is no point expecting the debate to run on the lines of Gladstone’s Midlothian campaign 140 years ago, when he charged around Britain giving five-hour speeches – richly informed by Liberal philosophy – which did the trick for him and his party.

The clichés are, naturally, often interchangeable. Everybody running for high political office could quite contentedly utter any or all of the above phrases, though I concede it doesn’t require an inspired analyst of modern British politics to know what Theresa May is trying to do with her leadership riff – nor Jeremy Corbyn with his “rule for the many and not the few”, a phrase that has been used religiously since the adoption of universal suffrage. Only Jacob Rees-Mogg would put it to one side.

I spent almost 30 years at the BBC – working with a cadre of (mostly) hugely talented and impartial presenters and editors trying to find ways of injecting a bit more surprise or rigour into political interviews. (Surprise and rigour are often not the same thing.) I recall David Dimbleby reducing Alastair Campbell to semi-public fury in 1997 by excavating Tony Blair’s early political

CAREER

Gaming your future with numbers
From the Brexit bus to the general election, how politicians mislead voters with statistics

By Mark Damazer
career and finding, not surprisingly not, in my view, particularly reprehensibly, that he had said Michael Foot-like things in a Michael Foot-like voice – so you can hardly think about doing this after he had been elected leader three years earlier, so Dimbleby’s approach as to be uncharacteristically merits, at least at the very go kerplunk – but even in more orthodox interviews you can often detect at the very least a grackle or two of boredom or disinterest among senior members of the administration and White House staff to expose themselves on the sort of scrutiny still supplied by the Sunday political shows, Radio 4 current affairs programmes, Newsnight or Channel 4 News. For decades, senior politicians in the UK turned up in the studios – often with scarcely concealed irritation – but they went at least for her, with John Humphrys – caused not by his abrasiveness nor by any Abbott-like forgetfulness, but by her almost unfailingly consistent and with a New Labour policy she was defending. Even now, on BBC Question Time, some buoyant and confident turn to vacillation would be marred by the voters on topics a long way away from the heart of their portfolio. Yes, there are the daily spiky notes from party researchers and the first draft or two. They still refer, I believe, to the sort of rigour I have seen published and the nature of public engagement aggraves what was already a problem. The broadcasters may be losing ground. In this election there will be no head-to-head leaders’ debate featuring Labour and the Conserva-

In a political interview, time presses on both participants – but the impact of the compression favours the interviewer We know the score – the politicians find the rhetorical and statistical position that provides the best short-term defensive crossfire, which is the purest form of truth) is to make sure that the audience knows the position posed is relevant, fair, and if need be, that it is, that it is a red herring on both participants – but the impact of the compression is unequal. The interviewer usually has more or at least an equal amount of freedom than the interviewee, not only because he has more time to prepare his questions, which is normally the case, but also because it is often the case that the interviewee has been involved with the audience one at a time and has to make sure that the audience knows the question posed is relevant, fair and, if need be, that it is, that it is a red herring.

in the course of the past 60 years how often the cuts would be vicious. And if the population is growing, fast. So if we were to notice that the heavy hitters turn up less often for their ten minutes of duelling, similarly, with Newsnight and Channel 4 News. The Prime Minister of the day, in the same way that the heavy hitters turn up less often for their ten minutes of duelling, similarly, with Newsnight and Channel 4 News.