

Feel the heat

I can feel the drop forming on my right temple.

Don't try to dab it. Keep your hands on the lectern. No-one else can see the sweat beading.

I concentrate on my diction. *Be precise!* And on the message I'm trying to convey. *Let the emotion flow, with light and shade.*

Oh no! There's another one forming on the left temple. It's not hot in here. This is an air-conditioned hall. This is my internal reaction.

I glance across the assembled faces. All the eyes are on me. No-one appears to be looking down – or falling asleep.

A deep breath and an encouraging smile for the crowd as I continue trying to deliver the words I didn't write.

How long before my hypocrisy is exposed? It's no fun being hung out like this.

I carry on. The speech writer, to my mind, has been overly supportive of the theme of hope. I can't fake sincerity. The evidence doesn't suggest it. *I'm being set up.*

Goodness! The truth is all I have.

And then, it happens. A shout, from out in the audience.

'You know that's bullshit! Spare us all!'

A man rises to leave. Others start muttering.

Feeling a lightning bolt of inspiration, I say, 'I was just testing you – to see how long you would tolerate this rubbish!'

The muttering and the man stop. Silence. Anticipation.

'Of course, this isn't the truth!' I say. 'No-one should believe this!'

Eyes widen. Heads turn in question to neighbours.

'But this is what you've been fed for years,' I add.

Gasps. *Are they on my side? Am I on **their** side?*

'Have you believed it?' I ask.

Uncomfortable rustling, as people shuffle squirm in their seats.

I can sense my minders in the stage wings, going slowly crazy as I've deviated from their plan of action. *Don't look at them.*

‘The planet is warming,’ I say. ‘But it’s not some grand conspiracy from anonymous people who would control the world. And you’re not the saviours who will maintain our nation’s freedoms on your own.’ I pause. I sense a threat growing. *Ignore it! I’m angry to even be in this position.* ‘Because, frankly, you’ve been conned by people who don’t want to lose their power.’

Furtive whisperings. Someone says, ‘I knew it.’

The next shout comes from the front row. ‘So what the hell are you doing up there on the stage? Surely you’re not just here to tell us how the government will protect our jobs? They lie. All the time, they lie.’

A blonde-haired woman, five rows back, takes up the argument with a finger-point at me, ‘Is that true? Are you a bloody fraud too?’ She pauses to build up steam. ‘We’ve lived for generations in this valley. You won’t be taking our jobs and lifestyle away.’

‘No! Certainly not!’ I reply.

The shouting mob stops again, for a few seconds.

I avoid saying that nature will do that for you, if you continue down this path.

‘I won’t be moving you out of your valley or taking your jobs away. I’ll be trying to help you hold on to the homes of generations.’

The murmured whispers from perplexed minds float up to me on the stage. ‘How?’ and ‘It’s just words’ and ‘You can’t trust any of the bastards’.

I now have several beads of sweat sliding down the side of my face.

These people are undoubtedly here for some revolutionary support, an insurrection perhaps – against the powerful, the people that they think are denying them freedoms and rights.

I glance to the sides of the stage but my minders are not visible. *Have they fled? Am I really here on my own now?*

I’m supposed to be the credible outsider, from another place – someone that the crowd might think would certainly endorse the validity of their arguments.

But the minders are using me – someone to shield the politicians from just such a crowd, to dull the waves of social media misinformation, to re-gain public trust.

The script writers had a plan – lots of colourful screen displays of happy promise for the future, interspersed with fear if there is any sense of non-

compliance. But like many plans in warfare, they go out the window when the action starts. I put down my hand clicker for their graphics presentation. *I won't be needing that now.*

I feel the sweat from my armpits seeping into my shirt. *Thank goodness I wore black – it mightn't be so visible.*

I'm slowly dying up here alone on the stage – like a comedian whose jokes have stiffed. Where's the inspiration that might save me? Think!

My initial credibility with the disillusioned mob has apparently come from my attempt at exposing the fallacies and spin of the political world, on social media. It hadn't been a deliberate act of 'treason' – just an innocent attempt at clarifying factual misrepresentation.

But, apparently, I have breached 'national security'.

I am – by instinct and training – a statistician. I study the methodology and assumptions behind published data. I critically examine publicly available modelling processes and the quality of evidence that leads to their projected conclusions. My mind is attuned to the host of illogical fallacies that render so many much-vaunted projections to be as reliable to the public as reading the tea leaves.

I demonstrated the blindingly obvious incongruities between government spin and the reality of world scientific data, on social media. Apparently, in the process, I may have inadvertently touched on information that some consider to be classified, or secret.

I had only joined statistical dots and lots of jumpy people clearly don't like their public narrative being challenged.

In less than a day, some global conspiracy theorists had **re-interpreted** my statements to fit their own storyline and posted them world-wide.

Within hours, the custodians of national security were at my doorstep, to interview me under threat of imprisonment if I refused to reveal my sources.

They didn't believe my '*I just joined the dots*' explanation or that there are **no** secret sources – only publicly available data that they obviously didn't take the trouble to notice well enough.

I have been forced to accept their deal in order to establish my non-treasonous bona-fides and spare me a likely isolated prison cell. I've 'agreed' to deliver a speech to the recalcitrants in this valley, who do not accept the

government line and who have shared the distortions of my cherry-picked post, virally. Perhaps, they see me as champion of their dissent.

My shirt is drenched but my mouth is dry!

The mob is confused, talking to neighbours. Some are looking at my lonely perspiring figure on the stage.

The impasse is broken by a female voice from the audience, 'Well, who's right? Us or the government?'

'Neither,' I reply, racing to find some way of explaining the impossible to the brainwashed believers.

'But you're here,' the dark-haired woman's voice is strident, 'because you posted evidence that we **are** right!' Her fist is raised as she turns to others behind her, seeking support for her statement.

My shirt is now soaking the top of my trousers – thankfully also black.

I say, 'I posted criticism of the government's methodology – not their policy or beliefs. Others have re-framed what I wrote to suit their own arguments.' I pause. 'That's the whole point about this business.'

The adrenalin is whooshing up through me. I've confused them. But they're not leaving. Nor are they swarming over the stage.

'What d'you mean?' a puzzled man in the front row asks.

'No-one knows the right answers,' I reply. 'They're guessing. Even **your** facts are just someone's opinion or deliberate stirring. You have to start with evidence that can be tested. That's all I've done.'

'Well, if the coal mines shut, that's fucken evidence enough here,' a muscled man shouts out from the middle of the crowd. 'And we're not going to let that happen, are we?' He gives an intimidating look to those around him. 'There's coal for another two hundred years down there, even with current technology.'

I smile. *Technology has assumed an unchallengeable status in modern parlance. Few understand, but they have faith that whatever form 'technology' might take in the future, it will provide the answers to life's dilemmas.*

'There might well be enough coal for two hundred years of mining,' I say. 'But the other evidence might perhaps be that coal is no longer going to be profitable on the world market. If people won't buy it, you can't sell it and there'll be no jobs in mining for it.'

The same man holds up his gnarled hands. ‘Five generations of my family have mined coal here. I won’t be the last.’

‘But,’ I say, ‘five generations ago many were still travelling by horse and cart – and using oil lamps for lighting. The world’s changed.’

‘Well, not on my coin, it hasn’t. I’m not paying for government slackness. I mine coal. That’s what I do!’ He turns again to his mates with a smug *don’t argue with me* smile.

‘Who pays you?’ I ask.

‘The company.’

‘And if the company can’t sell it, you’ll be like the old prospectors – scratching away on your own, hoping to make a living.’

Before the man can add words to his angry snort, a lady comes to his rescue.

‘So what’s your solution?’ she says to me.

‘My solution is to get beyond the blatant deception told by snake-oil salesmen and the self-righteous who have convinced themselves in their own echo-chambers. Predictions need to be based on testable evidence with independent analysts following a scientific method. What you’re hearing is the electioneering of fear and hope – or opinion surveys, made for the entertainment industry, or people who just enjoy fomenting mischief, like cheering on a fight.’ I pause. ‘You need to be listening to the collected non-aligned peer-reviewed observations and research of the world’s leading scientists.’

‘But you published evidence that supported our argument, for freedom.’

‘**I didn’t.**’ I raise my arms in an instinctive plea for understanding. ‘People with agendas cherry-picked what I published and distorted it to suit their own motives. You shouldn’t ever blindly accept anything just because you see it written somewhere. Check it across multiple credible references. And, importantly, think for yourselves.’

Silence.

I ask, ‘Is the climate changing here in the valley? Are there more extreme floods, droughts, fires? Are there a lot more people on the planet?’ *What else can I say?* ‘You can clearly mine coal – and probably fix machinery. But can you repair a broken mobile phone? Can you make a microchip? Can you explain the Dark Web to me? What about artificial intelligence – or satellite technology – or electro-magnetics? Whose responsibility are the 70 million refugees in the

world? Or the thousands of homeless in our **own** wealthy country? The world's changing, isn't it? This is your lived experience. It wasn't like this even one generation ago.'

The women are the strongest arguers. 'You're just being smart,' one says. 'Can you do any of these things you're asking us?'

'No, I can't! But I can blow the whistle when statistics are being misused to fuel dangerous rumours or power grabs. That's what I've done and I'm in trouble for doing that.'

The angry miner responds. 'See! I told you it's all a conspiracy. They're trying to shut us down.'

'So what's **your** solution?' I ask.

'Stand up to the government. Refuse to let them make laws to take away our freedoms,' he replies.

'And how do you do that?'

'Vote them out. Put our own people in charge,' another lady calls out.

'In charge of what?' I ask.

'How the country is run.'

'Using what information – if you think what they're saying is all lies?'

'There's lots available on the web now.'

'How will you know if it's true or just someone making it up to cause mischief?'

'Well, **you** could check it for us, couldn't you?' she says.

'So you trust **me**?' I smile. 'That's not enough. We all have to become critical thinkers. Go back to the source of information. Test the methods. Don't just assume. Check! You all deal safely with danger every day in a mining environment. You'd all be good at managing risk. That's why you're here now. You don't trust what you're being told. Agreed?'

I wait for a few nods before continuing, 'But the web has lots of people spouting fantasy worlds and drawing people into their brainwashing cults.'

I sigh and sit down on the stage with my legs over the front. I run my hand over my troubled forehead. 'Is it just me finding it hot in here?'

Is that some empathy I see in their expressions?

I pause, as they wait. 'Look, tradition is important but it doesn't guarantee your survival. Change is happening in the real world. You all see it. We have to

adapt – based on checkable information. Don't just accept crazy opinions or sweeping statistics as being right without testing their assumptions! Then use your vote. You have freedom to choose.'

The mob pauses briefly, like a statue game.

One man scratches his lank hair. 'You're not what we expected. We'll have to think about what you've said. Is anyone else listening to you?'

Yes, the national security people have been listening. They'll be waiting as I leave this building.

'You have my contact email,' I reply. *The security people set it up especially for this occasion. They probably want to track anyone who communicates with me. Pah!* 'If I can help analyse your information sources, I'm happy to do that.' *Will that appease my minders?*

What an irony? I'm offering to help these people sort bullshit from trustable information because the justifying statistical interpretation was dodgy. And my nation's security people see me as a subversive who should be intimidated with dire threats – to cover up that dodginess.

The crowd slowly filters out, some with encouraging words, others with thoughtful expressions. No-one abuses me – although several with stern faces pointedly ignore me.

One mature lady says gently, 'You must be having your own personal summer. You're dripping with sweat.' She gives a small chuckle. 'You could be an honorary miner.'

I smile and say, 'It's the unexpected warmth in your valley.'

She smiles back. *Maybe I have been successful in getting through to some of them.*

Then I climb back up onto the stage and walk over to meet my minders in the wings. 'Well?' I ask, more in hope than certainty.

I can't read their faces. They are such inscrutable hard people.

I don't fit in their world – no warmth of belonging, only the heat of jumping through the crazy hoops of other people's hang-ups and phobias.

How hard would they make it if I really was some disreputable person?

'Maybe,' is the response from the serious senior man, as he puts his phone to his ear for more advice from above.