

When I was at school, I was picked one year to perform a reading at the Christmas carol service. At that time (the age of sixteen) I was most uneasy at that time about entering a church. Terrified that I might be struck down by a bolt of lightning for being an atheist. The logic of being thus attacked by a god I wasn't supposed to believe in was no barrier to my fear. I couldn't share my concerns with parents or teachers, as I was equally scared of their reaction, so I bravely carried on and prepared to carry out my Christian duty.

I use the word perform quite deliberately. I had no fear of standing up in front of others to read to, as even at that young age I had acquired many years of performance though dancing at highland games and performing in amateur dramatics. I would quite happily have written my own words if anyone had thought them more interesting than the bible. Appropriately though, I was duly given my passages, rehearsed them in front of the mirror and my parents, and delivered a dull but adequate message.

My strongest memory of the occasion, though, was being party to a conversation between the head-teacher and the minister before the service began. They were discussing the numbers who had turned up (parents and friends were welcome in addition to pupils and staff) and how they thought it would go. They had the privilege, denied me, of creating their own words. Having obviously put some effort into their work they were discussing the acoustics of the church and the best methods of delivery. It was clear both understood there was an art to delivering a message, and were as aware as any performer of the tricks and methods that help keep the attention of an audience.

Last weekend I was reminded of my first oratory performance when I sat through a good many speeches at the SNP Conference in Inverness. The show was very well hosted by Eden Court and combined with the weather left many visitors, I think, with a great impression of our Highland capital.

It wasn't my first political conference, although the only one I will attend this year, and it had the usual array of pressure groups, fringe meetings and motions swept through or hotly contested. The top dogs had carefully rehearsed, professionally written speeches and I am sure achieved their aims; be that rallying the troops, annoying the English press or providing a sound bite for the evening news. Since the untimely demise of Michael Foot from national Labour party leadership, our politicians and leaders have put an increasing amount of time and effort into the art of presentation.

As with any performance, some are better than others at delivery. It takes a lot more effort to concentrate on the content of a dull speaker than it does one of the gifted performers. For better or worse, I was more interested in the subject matter of the less dramatic speakers than the table thumpers, so managed to take most of it all in. The standing ovation given to Kenny McAskill at the beginning of his speech felt more spontaneous than many moments at the conference. It's not hard to spot the cues for applause and to know when to cheer or stand up. I was mildly disappointed not to get the opportunity to wave the little Saltire I was given at the entrance, but put it to good use later on when Rikki was singing on X-Factor.

What I enjoyed much more at the conference were the fringe parties and the debates on party policy. These were usually delivered by delegates with, I have no doubt, as much passion as the leaders but with far less professionalism. Sometimes this worked to their advantage. One young man related his personal experience to the motion being proposed and gained a matchless level of concentration in the theatre while he spoke. His motion was passed. Ross-shire's own Jean Urquhart gave a witty, natural performance when her turn came hopefully inspired a few delegates to follow in her political and community footsteps.

But I'm sure that even the dullest of speakers gave some thought to the content of their speech, and hope that most considered how they delivered it. One or two appeared to be making excellent

points at the start of their speeches, but after listening to them for a minute or two, I lost the will to live, and wonder if it was down to their performance when their motions failed. Just as my reading of the bible at school all those years ago might have inspired some of those listening that day, I realise it may have had just the opposite effect due to my unpractised delivery. Still, I made my mum and dad proud.