

**SPEECH ON ‘HUBRIS SYNDROME’
DELIVERED BY THE RT HON LORD DAVID OWEN CH
ON THE OCCASION OF
THE CONFERRAL OF THE JAMES JOYCE AWARD
BY THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN
TUESDAY 4 OCTOBER 2011**

A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man first appeared in serial form in 1914. Joyce started *Stephen Hero* in 1903, wrote a *Portrait of the Artist* sketch in 1904 and began *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* in 1907. When he moved to Zurich in 1915 he resumed in June of that year work on *Ulysses* and serialisation of that began in *Little Review* in 1918. Serialisation was halted in 1920, the book was banned in the USA in 1921 but published in Paris in 1922. The character of Stephen Dedalus has long fascinated analysts of Joyce’s writing. For me, having chosen to speak on *The Hubris Syndrome* something that I first described in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine in 2006ⁱ, I am interested in whether the name Dedalus was chosen deliberately to bring to mind the Daedalus of Greek mythology.

Joyce was a master of foreign languages but he chose English, despite living at a time when the Irish language was being revived, as his language to communicate to the English speaking world. He was familiar with Homer and the *Odyssey*; but unlike Yeats, for whom Homer was the major inspiration, Joyce’s favourite writer was Dante. In Zurich he had a number of Greek friends and the Greek language fascinated him. One friend in particular, Nicolas Santos, would recite bits of the *Odyssey* to him.ⁱⁱ *Ulysses* initially had *Homeric* chapter headings that were only dropped when it was published in book form. There seems little doubt therefore that Joyce who was fascinated by father/son relationships chose Dedalus as Stephen’s surname with a purpose, almost an aspiration knowing that, at least in Stephen’s earliest incarnation, there would be more elements of Icarus in his character than Dedalus.

Another aspect of Joyce's life was his interest in 'madness'. He wrote a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, one of his key female sponsors, on 24 June 1921, "People in Zurich persuaded themselves that I was gradually going mad and actually endeavoured to induce me to enter a sanatorium where a certain Doctor Jung (the Swiss Tweedledum which is not to be confused with the Viennese Tweedledee, Doctor Freud) amuses himself at the expense (in every sense of the word) of Ladies and Gentlemen who are troubled with bees in their bonnets." In fact, Joyce refused to submit to psychoanalysis by Jung and this led to another of his sponsors, Edith McCormick, suddenly withdrawing her financial sponsorship, though her monthly cheque continued six months beyond the year intended.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jung initially famously ridiculed *Ulysses* but then revised his opinion, believing it had taught him much even though "it meant too much grinding of nerves and of grey matter." Joyce's daughter, Lucia, who had been diagnosed as having schizophrenia by a psychiatrist, Henri Codet, was interviewed by Jung and Joyce went along with her. Later Joyce said to his son, Giorgio, that "although Jung had made a good impression on him, and he believed he had many successes, what he had said about Lucia and psychoanalysis he had known himself all along."^{iv} Jung's opinion was that Joyce was touched by madness.

Perhaps the most interesting insight into Joyce's attitude to hubris came in a conversation with Arthur Power^v, "Hamlet was mad, hence the great drama; some of the characters in the Greek plays were mad; Gogol was mad; Van Gogh was mad; but I prefer the word exultation, exultation which can merge into madness, perhaps. In fact all great men have had that vein in them; it was the source of their greatness; the reasonable man achieves nothing."

Before dealing with the key word that Joyce uses, "exultation" it is worth reflecting that Gogol suffered from manic-depressive illness or as it is called now bipolar disorder and had at least one seriously affected first-degree relative.^{vi} And Van Gogh, whose psychiatric diagnosis has long been debated, almost certainly did not suffer from either prophyria or Meniere's Disease but from manic depression with a strong familial disposition.^{vii}

Exultation is often linked to mania. Some psychiatrists see manic depression as a spectrum illness and are ready to diagnose it more freely than others who demand a clear-cut manic episode in addition to depression before they are ready to commit to the diagnosis. Churchill's mental state has long been the subject of controversy and I have examined this issue in some depth^{viii}. but have concluded that he did not have bipolar disorder, having found no incontrovertible manic episode in his life. The one description of Churchill, however, which comes closest to a manic episode comes from Oliver Harvey, the Private Secretary to the then Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. Harvey noted in his diary on 13 July 1943:

The PM (Churchill) was in a crazy state of exultation. The battle has gone to the old man's head. The quantities of liquor he consumed – champagne, brandies, whiskies – were incredible.^{ix}

What is interesting is that Harvey says it was the battle, not the alcohol, which had gone to Churchill's head. A more revealing account of the exceptional character of Churchill comes from General Hastings Ismay, Churchill's Chief of Staff in a letter written on 3 April 1942, to General Auchinleck:

You cannot judge the PM by ordinary standards; he is not in the least like anyone that you or I have ever met. He is a mass of contradictions. He is either on the crest of a wave, or in the trough: either highly laudatory, or bitterly condemnatory: either in an angelic temper, or a hell of a rage: when he isn't fast asleep he's a volcano. There are no half measures in his make-up. He is a child of nature with moods as variable as an April day....^x

The more, over the years, I have examined hubristic behaviour in leaders in all walks of life the more I am convinced that one must not feel that it is always necessary to come up with a specific known psychiatric illness. Some of these people are simply

extraordinary, they defy categorization, they cope with immense stress and their strengths and their weaknesses have to be seen as part of the whole.

What interests me is the hubris that some leaders seem to acquire by virtue of the powerful position they find themselves in. These people I have defined as having Hubris Syndrome and I deliberately exclude anyone with a specific psychiatric illness. This may be an acquired personality change or disorder. It is primarily the product of power.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Barbara Tuchman writes with great insight about power.^{xi}

We are less aware that it breeds folly; that the power to command frequently causes failure to think; that the responsibility of power often fades as its exercise augments. The overall responsibility of power is to govern as reasonably as possible in the interest of the state and its citizens. A duty in that process is to keep well-informed, to heed information, to keep mind and judgement open and to resist the insidious spell of wooden-headedness. If the mind is open enough to perceive that a given policy is harming rather than serving self-interest, and self-confident enough to acknowledge it, and wise enough to reverse it, that is a summit in the art of government.

The extent to which illness can affect the processes of government and the decision-making of heads of government, engendering folly, in the sense of foolishness, stupidity or rashness, was an issue I faced quite directly on a number of occasions once I became Foreign Secretary and it has interested me ever since. I was also fascinated by those leaders who were not ill and whose cognitive faculties functioned well but who appeared to develop a distinct condition, what I have come to describe as the ‘Hubris Syndrome’^{xii}.

‘Hubris’ is not yet a medical term. Its most basic meaning was developed in ancient Greece simply as a description of an act: a hubristic act was one in which a powerful figure, puffed up with overweening pride and self-confidence, treated others with insolence and

contempt. He seemed to get kicks from using his power to treat others in this way, but such dishonouring behaviour was strongly condemned in ancient Greece. In a famous passage from Plato's *Phaedrus*, a predisposition to hubris is defined: 'But when desire irrationally drags us toward pleasures and rules within us, its rule is called excess [*hubris*].' Plato saw this 'rule of desire' as something irrational that drags men into doing the wrong thing through acts of hubris. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle picks up the element of desire Plato identifies in hubris and argues that the pleasure someone seeks from an act of hubris lies in showing himself as superior. 'That is why the young and the wealthy are given to insults [*hubristai*, i.e. being hubristic]; for they think that, in committing them [acts of hubris], they are showing superiority.'

But it was in drama rather than philosophy that the notion was developed further to explore the patterns of hubristic behaviour, its causes and consequences. A hubristic career proceeded along some-thing like the following course. The hero wins glory and acclamation by achieving unwonted success against the odds. The experience then goes to the head: they begin to treat others, mere ordinary mortals, with contempt and disdain and develop such confidence in their own ability that they begin to think themselves capable of anything. This excessive self-confidence leads them into misinterpreting the reality around them and into making mistakes. Eventually they get their come-uppance and meet their nemesis, which destroys them. Nemesis is the name of the goddess of retribution, and often in Greek drama the gods arrange nemesis because a hubristic act is seen as one in which the perpetrator tries to defy the reality ordained by them. The hero committing the hubristic act seeks to transgress the human condition, imagining themselves to be superior and to have powers more like those of the gods. But the gods will have none of that: so it is they who destroy him. The moral is that we should beware of allowing power and success to go to our heads, making us too big for our boots.

Acts of hubris are much more common in heads of government, whether democratic or not, than is often realised and hubris is a major contributor to Tuchman's definition of folly: '*a perverse persistence in a policy demonstrably unworkable or counter-productive*'.

She continues: *‘Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists in assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs . . . also the refusal to benefit from experience.’*^{xiii} A characteristic of hubris is the inability to change direction because this involves admitting that one has made a mistake.

Bertrand Russell once wrote:

‘The concept of “truth” as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy hitherto has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness – the intoxication of power.’

Leaders intoxicated with pride and power are often described by laymen as having become ‘unhinged’, ‘barmy’, even ‘mad’, though these are not terms the medical profession would use about them. Democratic societies, especially those that have evolved out of absolute monarchies, have developed systems of checks and balances to try to protect themselves from such leaders. But these mechanisms – Cabinet, Parliament and the media – are not always effective. Under despotic leaders, where there are no democratic controls and few internal mechanisms, short of a coup, to remove them, there is often little that can be done. External condemnation and international sanctions have so far proved of only limited value while external military force has had questionable success.

Public discussion of illness in political leaders is reasonably straight-forward when the illness is described as physical but is less so when it is described as mental. This is because, regarding mental illness, the general public and professional practitioners do not speak such a shared language as they do when talking about ordinary physical illness. There is also a mismatch between what the press and public talk about as mental illness and what the medical profession is ready to diagnose as mental illness. When writers, like Joyce or the press, let alone the public, use terms such as ‘madness’, ‘lunacy’, ‘psychopath’,

‘megalomania’ or ‘hubris’ – some or all of which have been used about despots as diverse as Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, Mao Zedong, Slobodan Milošević, Robert Mugabe and Saddam Hussein on one hand and democratic leaders as different as Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and George W. Bush on the other^{xiv} – they are using words which the medical profession has either long abandoned, redefined or severely restricted. Madness and lunacy for doctors are terms that have been totally replaced by whether a defined mental disorder is present. Psychopathic behaviour has been narrowed into specific personality disorders and megalomania to delusions of grandeur. Usually heads of government who are popularly dubbed as in some sense mad are not considered to have any mental illness by the medical profession.

It may be that people expect, even want, their leaders to be different from the norm, to display more energy, work longer hours, appear exhilarated by what they are doing and full of self-confidence – in short, to behave in ways that, taken beyond a certain point, a professional would mark down as manic. So long as those leaders are attempting to achieve what the public wishes them to achieve, it does not want to be told that they are mentally ill. But when those leaders lose the support of their public, it becomes a very different matter. Then the public is ready to use words long discarded by the profession to describe mental illness, as a means of expressing its objection to the way its leaders are behaving or have behaved.

One such traditional term, no longer part of the professional lexicon but, it seems to me, a wholly legitimate word for the public to use, is ‘megalomania’. I was myself charged with ‘a display of megalomania’, by Peter Jenkins in the *Guardian* in the summer of 1987. By using the term he was saying not simply that he thought what I was doing was wrong (in resisting the merger of the SDP with the Liberal Party) but that it was the consequence of a mental state I had got myself into at a time, after I had resigned as leader, when the SDP was breaking up^{xv}. The medical profession may not use the term ‘megalomania’, but that does not mean that no one else should. Megalomania can be an occupational hazard for politicians, and its manifestation in a developed form is hubris.

In February 2009, together with Jonathan Davidson, the emeritus professor of psychiatry at Duke University, North Carolina, I wrote an article for the journal *Brain* entitled ‘Hubris Syndrome: An Acquired Personality Disorder?’^{xvi} Professor Davidson was the lead author of a study entitled ‘Mental Illness in US Presidents between 1778 and 1974: A Review of Biographical Sources’^{xvii}. In our article Professor Davidson and I proposed fourteen potential symptoms that might trigger a diagnosis of Hubris Syndrome. These symptoms typically grow in strength the longer a political or business leader remains in post. Lists can be tedious, yet it is worth detailing what these fourteen potential symptoms are, not least because I suspect that some of them may well ring bells in others’ minds, recalling powerful leaders they have had experience of themselves. Many overlap with well-recognised personality disorders, but we labelled five as unique and particular to Hubris Syndrome (HS).

1. A narcissistic propensity to see the world in which the leader operates primarily as an arena in which to exercise power and seek glory.
2. A predisposition to take actions which seem likely to cast the individual in a good light – i.e. in order to enhance their image.
3. A disproportionate concern with image and presentation.
4. A messianic manner of talking about current activities and a tendency to exaltation.
5. An identification with the nation or organisation which the individual leads to the extent that he or she regards his or her outlook and interests as identical with it (unique to HS).
6. A tendency to speak of himself or herself in the third person or to use the royal ‘we’ (unique to HS).
7. Excessive confidence in his or her own judgement and contempt for the advice or criticism of others.
8. An exaggerated self-belief, bordering on a sense of omnipotence, in what personally he or she can achieve.
9. A belief that rather than being accountable to the mundane court of colleagues or public opinion, he or she answers to a far grander court – History or God.

10. An unshakeable belief that in that court he or she will be vindicated (unique to HS).
11. A loss of contact with reality, often associated with progressive isolation.
12. Restlessness, recklessness and impulsiveness (unique to HS).
13. A tendency to allow his or her 'broad vision' of the moral rectitude of a proposed course to obviate the need to consider practicality, cost or outcomes (unique to HS).
14. 'Hubristic incompetence': not the ordinary incompetence where things go wrong because a faulty judgement or a miscalculation has been made, but where the incompetence is due to too much self-confidence that has led the leader not to worry about the nuts and bolts of a decision.

Very rarely in medicine has one patient all the possible symptoms or signs of a syndrome. In the case of hubris syndrome we believe the diagnosis can be made if three or more of these symptoms are manifest, and provided they include at least one of the five symptoms we classify as unique.

In our article, Professor Davidson and I depict hubris syndrome as developing only after power has been held for a period of time and in this sense it is acquired and follows a tradition that acknowledges the existence of pathological personality change, such as the enduring personality change after trauma called traumatic stress disorder. The nature of leaders who have the syndrome is that they are resistant to the very idea that they can be ill, for this is a sign of weakness. To the extent that hubris syndrome shares common elements with narcissistic and sociopathic disorders, such as impaired decision-making, poor impulse control, poor modulation of aggression and lack of appropriate empathy, the findings of altered dopaminergic, noradrenergic and serotonergic function in the brain in these conditions could all be relevant.

Power is a heady drug which not every political leader has the necessary rooted character to handle: a combination of common sense, humour, decency, scepticism and even cynicism that treats power for what it is, a privileged opportunity to serve and to influence – and sometimes determine – the turn of events. The havoc which hubristic leaders can wreak is usually suffered by the people in whose name they govern. The virtues of a representative

democracy lie in the scope it gives elected leaders to exercise real leadership and to show the decisiveness most voters prefer to hesitation, doubt and vacillation. But the exercise of that leadership needs to carry the trust of the electorate, which is usually lost when the leader crosses the line between competent decision-making and hubristic incompetence.

Curbing political leaders' hubristic behaviour has to rely on strengthening national democratic checks and balances. These have been built up over the years in the US, the UK and here in Ireland. The most important is vigilance and scrutiny by the Cabinet, for it comprises the people who see the most of their head of government's true conduct in office. The readiness of Cabinet ministers to resign on principle is very important. Elliot Richardson resigned as US Attorney General rather than sack Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor, as ordered by President Nixon. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned when President Carter against his advice ordered helicopters into Iran in a botched attempt to extract American hostages. As leader of the House of Commons Robin Cook resigned in 2003 over the invasion of Iraq. Had US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, or Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, resigned before the Iraq War the effect might have been considerable. Elections offered the general public a chance to remove Bush and Blair from office in 2004 and 2005 respectively, but both men through their parties won re-election. Even so, in mid-term elections in 2006 and 2007 there was considerable dissatisfaction recorded with each leader.

Press criticism was muted in both countries before the war in Iraq and for a while afterwards, either because the newspapers agreed with the decision to go to war or because they were embarrassed, having predicted a much more difficult military operation for the invasion than proved to be the case. Also it was very difficult to predict the insurgency without knowing more about the paucity of aftermath planning. There should have been more investigative journalism on both sides of the Atlantic and greater scrutiny by Congress and Parliament of aftermath planning.

In a democracy nothing can replace knowing more about the true nature and

character of the person we vote in to become head of our government. The press has a key role to play in this. The importance of character is made clear in the work of James Hillman. In his book *The Force of Character*^{xviii}, he writes, *'The limiting effect of one's innate image prevents that inflation, that trespassing or hubris that the classical world considered the worst of human errors. In this way character acts as a guiding force.'* We need more clues, or alerting information, such as whether the leader is displaying contempt, to identify Hubris Syndrome while in office. If we can define Hubris Syndrome better, then voters or selection panels are more likely to ensure that those they choose have qualities in their character which are less likely to succumb to the intoxication of power.

The decisive leaders in all walks of life who are most likely to avoid hubris are usually those who are careful to retain a personal modesty as they stay in power, to keep as far as possible their previous lifestyle, to listen to those close to them – “toeholders”: spouses, family and friends – and to eschew the trappings of power. Such leaders try to consult carefully even if that process may not alter their opinions. They make errors of judgement but they are not often errors born of ignorance or stemming from contempt for the views of others. Above all, they accept that the inbuilt institutional checks and balances should be scrupulously respected and they make little or no attempt to circumvent them.

A professor of modern history at Cambridge, David Reynolds, describes the hubris of leaders for whom their own personality is the key to their whole approach, when writing about Neville Chamberlain:

“A well-intentioned leader convinced of his rightness, whose confidence in his powers of persuasion bordered on hubris. Who squeezed out critical professional advice, controlling policy and information from an inner circle, and who played his best hands too early at the conference table. A leader whose rhetoric became increasingly extravagant and deceptive, yet whose apparent naivety may have been the outward face of a man who knew he had gone too far to turn back. Who does all this remind us of? For all their differences, Tony Blair's approach to summitry had a good deal in common with that of Neville Chamberlain.”^{xix}

Other democratic heads of government who suffered from hubris syndrome in the last century, apart from Chamberlain are David Lloyd George, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and George W. Bush. Theodore Roosevelt was hubristic but I think not manic depressive; Lyndon Johnson has been diagnosed as having had bipolar disorder,. Woodrow Wilson was hubristic but he suffered from arteriosclerosis, repeated strokes and dementia. Franklin Roosevelt looked as if he might be taken over by hubris when, in 1937, he fought and lost a battle with Congress over the Judicial Branch Reorganization Plan, affecting the nomination of justices to the Supreme Court^{xx}. But, fortunately, Roosevelt had a good sense of humour and a certain cynicism, which meant he never lost his moorings in the democratic system. From 1941 to 1945 his personal determination, and his qualities of ruthlessness, guile and optimism, in part the product of his poliomyelitis, gave him the political authority to mobilise his country for war and to win that war in the interests of the whole world. I do not believe Franklin Roosevelt developed hubris syndrome.

One of the simplest and best safeguards against hubris syndrome developing while in office would be if more democracies would enact legislation to ensure that no head of government could remain in office for longer than a set number of years. After Franklin Roosevelt was elected for a fourth term it was widely felt in the United States that there should be legislation to limit a President's tenure in office. Accordingly, a law was passed limiting any President to two elected terms, meaning a maximum of eight years. In Britain, there is no legislative limit on how long a Prime Minister can serve. We should legislate in the UK, and here in Ireland, to limit the number of years anyone can hold the office of Prime Minister to eight years of service, continuous or broken. Harold Wilson gave eight years' broken service. Margaret Thatcher, had she stepped down after eight years in May 1987, would have gone with her reputation very high and far better placed to be judged by history than after being removed by Conservative MPs in 1990. An eight-year limit would have meant that Tony Blair had to step down no later than May 2005, rather than being eventually removed by Labour MPs in 2007.

The environment of power that surrounds most leaders has considerable impact on even the most stable personality. They are sustained by an executive service, and have large numbers of advisers, chauffeur-driven cars, often with police outriders, and personal aircraft. This gives a standard of living that only a few very rich people in the world can match. But more importantly it creates an isolation that is now buttressed by a far greater personal security apparatus.

There is a yet more insidious isolation and that is the hierarchical structure, the deference within government that bolsters the Prime Minister so that he or she can easily come to believe that they are not as other men and women. There is, therefore, a much greater need for vigorous checks and balances on every head of government, to check their perks and the extent of the cocoon that surrounds them. The necessity for periodic endorsement by the electorate with the risk of defeat used to be one of democracy's most salutary experiences. Sadly, the beneficial effect of campaigning, with its levelling down, bringing the leader nearer to the life of the normal citizen, has not lasted. The trappings of power, particularly personal security, now stay with a head of government during an election, and this has meant they are shielded from normal electioneering. Ticket-only meetings stacked with party activists mean that old-style hustings meetings have gone. John Major, as Prime Minister, mounting his 'soap box' to campaign in the 1992 general election already seems a distant memory.

Lord Acton's famous dictum is, '*Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*' But it needs to be remembered that Acton preceded that dictum with a plea to judge those who hold power by a higher standard than those who do not: '*I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way against the holders of power.*'^{xxi}

The genius of James Joyce was not just his use of words but as he showed in Zurich he was an astringent thinker not susceptible to psycho-babble, and well aware of what an interesting figure Daedalus was in Greek mythology.

To promote multidisciplinary research into how to identify Hubris Syndrome, alleviate its symptoms and mentor those who may be developing it, we established earlier this year the Daedalus Trust^{xxii}. We chose the name Daedalus because we wanted to emphasise the positive features of leadership that takes calculated risks and Daedalus not only flew over Crete with the wings he designed but he also had the wisdom to warn his son, Icarus, that the wax which held the wings together meant he should be careful not to fly too high and get close to the sun and not too low or he would risk hitting the waves.

END

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