

P.S.

Hokey changey

SARAH PALIN, the running mate of US Republican presidential hopeful John McCain at the last election, seems to be gaining political prominence again. She is even being touted, at least by some commentators, as the party's next presidential candidate. With her semi-glamorous looks, homely style and knack for the sound bite, she seems to have been forgiven whatever misdemeanours she might have committed during the election race.

Speaking of sound bites, a year ago her comment about hockey moms and lipstick found its way repeatedly onto virtually every television set in the US. Her latest quotable quote came during a recent speech, when, addressing an absent Obama, she asked, "So, Mr President, how's all that 'hokey changey' stuff workin' out for ya?"

It was a great line, pithy, cutting and eminently quotable—the stuff of great political point-scoring. But it was also cynical, nasty and (arguably) unfair. The dire economic situation the USA and the world have been trying to recover from has been so extreme that it is virtually impossible to imagine *any* régime having brought about much hope or change in the course of one year. It takes time, time, and more time for unemployment and the plummeting of consumer confidence to feed through the system, for investment spending to begin again, and for people to feel better about the world. Whether or not her point was reasonable, however, it was, from a political point of view, a point worth scoring. Fairness is not the issue; no one will win a political debate by being fair to the other side. The aim instead is to extrapolate and exaggerate, to find the ludicrous exceptions to a policy, to go for the cheap shot. Politicians from all sides engage in such cynical games.

Palin's point made me consider two things. One was the human proclivity to go for the jibe or the cruel comment in order to make oneself appear better than one's opponent, irrespective of whether the comment is valid or justified. It is a technique every debater needs, and, if we are clever or quick-witted enough to come up with the line, a technique which many of us may have used in argument or conversation. Those of us slower of speech may have found themselves tongue-tied at the time, but full of cutting responses that we might have made with hindsight.

Derogatory, mocking comments are heard in Scriptural discussions where there is a heated exchange of views; they are also used in business meetings from time to time. Someone will go for a cheap shot to look clever, to belittle another or to make them look foolish. They may get a smirk out of it, or even a laugh, from their supporters, but what will they really have achieved in spiritual terms? Jesus spoke very firmly about calling one's brother 'fool'. Though we may not literally have done this, we may well have thought "You idiot!", or we may have implied that someone is a fool by the way we have mocked them or their view in our gimmicky and unfair rejoinder. People may make these kinds of comments, for instance, about those who have a different interpretation of prophecy from them, or about those who take a different view on how the ecclesial hall might be renovated. These are just two obvious examples; there are many more, and we each need to look at ourselves in this regard. There's a difference between making a point constructively and going for a cheap shot or a caricature.

Unfairness of this kind, and point-scoring of *any* kind (especially when we know we are misrepresenting, extrapolating, mocking, or otherwise being unfair) is the way of the flesh and not the spirit.

The other point which struck me about Palin's assault was its cynicism coupled with its realism. The very transforming of the terms 'hope' and 'change' into 'hokey changey' embeds the idea that true hope and change are not really realistic, that it was always a pipe dream and could never have happened. And in one sense she was absolutely right. It was impossible for Barack Obama, or any other mortal man, to give true hope or bring about fundamental change—the vision that he had eloquently articulated but would inevitably fail to accomplish. The Scriptures tell us not to put our trust in men or princes, because in them there is ultimately no help. For man in his own strength, hope and change will always be merely 'hokey changey'; a nice idea, but an unattainable one.

With the Lord Jesus Christ as our head, however, the blurred vision of 'hokey changey' jumps right back into focus. He is our hope, and he will bring true and lasting change to our world.

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