

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

Gaffes



NB: This is not a word for word transcript

Neil: Hello, I'm Neil.

Callum: And I'm Callum.

Neil: And this is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. Today we're talking about **political gaffes**.

Callum: Yes, the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, has suffered a rather embarrassing moment. Some private remarks he made to the US President, Barack Obama, during the G20 Summit in Cannes last week have been made public.

Neil: When a politician says or does something embarrassing, or which reveals thoughts he doesn't want the public to know about, it's called a political gaffe. More on political gaffes later on, but first a question for you, Callum. Are you ready?

Callum: Go on!

Neil: Seeing as we're talking about heads of state, I have a question about Presidents... Who is the President of Germany? Is it:

- a) Angela Merkel
- b) Christian Wulff
- c) Jurgen Klinsmann

Callum: Christian Wulff.

Neil: OK, well, we'll see if you're right at the end of the programme. Now let's get back to the subject of political gaffes. Let's find out exactly what it was that the French President said. Here's a report from the BBC's Christian Frazer:

Christian Frazer, BBC

On Thursday, as journalists were gathering for a bilateral news conference with the American and French presidents they were treated to a remarkable insight into the personal dynamics of the negotiating room. "I can't look at him any more" said Mr Sarkozy, of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, "he's a liar". "You're sick of him", said the American President in some exasperation, "I have to deal with him every day."

Callum: Ah, yes. That is pretty bad, isn't it? He called the Israeli Prime Minister "a liar".

Neil: I think Barack Obama would rather his comments hadn't become public either. He appears to have some sympathy for Mr Sarkozy by saying "I have to deal with him every day". Callum, what does it mean "to deal with someone"?

Callum: It means to talk to and meet someone often as part of your job. But Neil, I think one of the most interesting aspects of this story is that it took several days for French journalists who overheard the comments to report the story.

Neil: Yes, French journalists **overheard** the comments. This means they heard them without meaning to or without the speakers' knowledge. It seems pretty strange to me for journalists not to report such a big story.

Callum: Yes, I'm not sure British journalists would act in the same way. Here's the BBC's Christian Frazer again.

Christian Frazer, BBC

French journalists stunned by what they'd heard, initially agreed not to print the quotes. Was it ethically unsound or was it the overbearing deference, even fear, with which French journalists approach the political class? You can't help feeling British journalists might have reacted differently. In fact they did when Gordon Brown made a similar mistake.

Neil: The French journalists might have thought it was **ethically unsound** to print the quotes. This means they might have thought it was below the standards of their profession.

Callum: Or perhaps it was because in France there is a **deference** for the political class. A deference is a politeness and respect for someone or something.

Neil: As the reporter says, this approach is very different to the treatment the former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, received from the British press when he made a political gaffe before the last general election in the UK in May 2010. Do you remember what happened, Callum?

Callum: Yes, Gordon Brown was heard describing a person he had just spoken to as "a bigoted woman". A **bigoted** person is someone with strong and unreasonable opinions which they won't change under any circumstances.

Neil: And what kind of impact did this political gaffe have on Gordon Brown?

Callum: I think most people agree it was **the final nail in his coffin**.

Neil: The final nail in his coffin. This means it was the last in a series of events leading to the failure of something. Gordon Brown lost that election and his position as Prime Minister. Do you know of any other political gaffes, Callum?

Callum: There have been a few notable ones. My favourite was from a former US President, Ronald Reagan. He was getting ready to go on air when he said this:

Ronald Reagan

My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.

Neil: He joked that he'd signed **legislation**, meaning he'd created a law, which banned Russia! He added that the bombing would start in five minutes! Fortunately this wasn't broadcast but appeared at a later date. And so onto our quiz question, Callum.

Callum: Yes, I'm ready.

Neil: I asked who the President of Germany is...

Callum: And my answer was Christian Wulff

Neil: And you were right. I was hoping to trick people with that question. The President of Germany isn't as well known as the Chancellor, or Prime Minister. In fact, I had to look him up myself just to check! Thanks Callum. Well we hope you've enjoyed today's programme, and you'll join us again soon for another 6 Minute English.

Both: Bye!

Vocabulary and definitions

political gaffes	something a politician says or does which wasn't meant to be heard and causes embarrassment or offence
overheard	heard something without meaning to or without the speakers' knowledge
ethically unsound	below the standards of their profession
deference	a politeness and respect for someone or something
bigoted	a person with strong and unreasonable opinions which they won't change despite evidence
the final nail in the coffin	the last in a series of events leading to the failure of something
legislation	laws

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