

THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF ROME

POLITICAL POWER

Rome in 44 BC was in theory a democracy.¹ Laws (*leges*) were passed by the people as a whole – that is, the adult male citizens, who met for the purpose either in an assembly of the 35 tribes of Rome (the *comitia tributa*) or, more infrequently, in a gathering of the 193 'centuries' into which the citizen body was divided when it was drawn up on the Campus Martius in battle order (the *comitia centuriata*). It was by a system of group voting at these great mass meetings that war was declared on the state's enemies, legislation passed to regulate civil relations and criminal conduct, and magistrates appointed to lead troops into battle, conduct campaigns, convene courts, and enact the other multifarious tasks of the execution of government (see Figure 1).

Such was the theory. In practice,² the free exercise of democratic power had never been fully enjoyed by the Roman people, and curbs on their control of events, which had begun as simply practical restrictions, had by the Late Republic become sufficiently part of political life to appear to an outsider like Polybius in the mid-second century BC as if they must be constitutionally enshrined:



Figure 1 Silver denarius minted by order of the senator P. Nerva in 113 or 112 BC. The obverse has a bust of the goddess Roma, a personification of the city. The reverse shows the process of voting in Republican Rome: the voter on the left is handing his ballot, while the man on the right casts his vote in the urn. Photo courtesy of CNG Coins.

It was impossible even for a native to pronounce with certainty whether the whole system was aristocratic, democratic, or monarchical. This was indeed only natural. For if one fixed one's eyes on the power of the consuls, the constitution seemed completely monarchical and royal; if on that of the senate, it seemed again to be aristocratic; and when one looked at the power of the masses, it seemed clearly to be a democracy.

(*The Histories* 6.11.11–12)

Polybius' picture was idealized under the influence of Greek political philosophy, but he had lived in Rome for many years and showed real political insight. On the one hand, the power of the leading magistrates had been much enhanced by the widened scope of their responsibilities, which could involve commands of huge armies for long periods away from Rome. Cicero in the mid-first century BC confirmed in his treatise on the *Laus* that the highest magistrates acted like kings:

There shall be two magistrates with royal powers. Since they precede, judge, and consult, from these functions they shall be called praetors, judges and consuls. In the field they shall hold the supreme military power and shall be subject to no one. The safety of the people shall be their highest law.
(*Laus* 3.3.8)

In practice, the consuls in the Late Republic often achieved this quasi-monarchical power as much after as during the period of their magistracy, since the great army commands were by law reserved for ex-consuls at least five years after their consulships; such ex-consuls technically acted in place of the consuls and hence were termed *proconsuls*. Despite legal restrictions on the power of both consuls and proconsuls, ordinary citizens had little hope of opposing their power, except with the threat of prosecution when the magistracy came to an end.

On the other hand, the principle that magistracies were collegial (that is, held with a number of colleagues) engendered a certain necessary unity within the governing class. In 50 BC there were two consuls a year at the head of the state; eight praetors looked after legal jurisdiction in Rome. The four aediles (two curule, two plebeian) were responsible for urban administration in Rome, the corn supply, and the provision of public games and shows. The 20 quaestors had a variety of tasks, from the accompaniment of proconsular armies as chief of tax collection to more mundane jurisdiction in Rome. Below them ranked a variety of junior magistrates. At the bottom were the *vigintisexviri*, the 26 men whose tasks included the supervision of the sewers of Rome. The very fact that they had all stood for election to a series of these posts encouraged a sort of fellow feeling for others within their political culture. Anyone whose wealth was sufficient was in theory able to stand, but in the nature of things only those whose temperament inclined them to public life, or who were pushed forward by family or friends, chose to devote themselves to the strenuous and sometimes dangerous life of politics. But,

more importantly, advancement to the next rung in this clearly stratified hierarchy was usually possible only with the active support and friendship (*amicitia*) of other politicians, so that the development of reliable political supporters (*amici*), through marriage links or assiduous attendance, was a major concern of all politicians who had any ambition.

The operation of bonds of *amicitia* were clearest on the election hustings, but they not infrequently emerged also in the senate, the public body to which all ex-magistrates of a certain rank – since 80 BC all those who had held the quaestorship – automatically belonged. The senate was in theory no more than a forum for the leading men of the state to offer their advice to the current magistrates, but in practice the influence within the senate of senior politicians whose friendship might be necessary for those magistrates to proceed further in their career rendered it dangerous to ignore the senate's advice. Such respect for the senate could even be elevated into a political principle, as by Cicero, who characterized those politicians who followed the senate's wishes as *optimates* (the best men). Those who ignored the senate, on the grounds that the people's support mattered more than that of their fellow politicians, were liable to obloquy as *populares* (panderers to the people); since all politicians needed popular support whatever the attitude of the senate, the same title of abuse could be worn with pride when addressing the wider assemblies.

It can be seen that a major factor in ensuring stability in the political influence of senate and senior ex-magistrates was the rigid hierarchy of the *cursus honorum*, the steps by which a man advanced to the peak of a political career, the consulship, or, for a select few, appointment as one of the two censors elected at irregular intervals to fix the roll of Roman citizens, weed out the unworthy from the senate and set the state back on the path of virtue.³ Precisely the rigidity which was normal enhanced the status of those few who by charisma, luck or force circumvented the system, as did Pompeius Magnus when he was elected to the consulship in 70 BC at the age of 36, after holding no previous posts in the city of Rome. For most Romans, it seemed necessary and right that such figures should remain exceptional. Prestige was assumed to grow naturally with age and experience. It was dangerous for young men to have too much power. Men in positions of influence should have sufficient means to act as gentlemen, and the ability to point to ancestors of high achievement was a major advantage: the constant appeals to ancestral virtue in Roman political rhetoric contrast oddly with the great extension of citizenship to foreigners. Technically only those whose male ancestors were consuls or patricians (a select group of families who had held power in the Early Republic) could call themselves *nobiles*, but politicians were accustomed to appeal to their female ancestors also when it suited. Those who could not do so made a virtue of necessity by claiming that as new men (*novi homines*), their own talents compensated for poor birth, but sneers about humble origins always remained a potent weapon in the hands of opponents. The principles

ÉLITE POLITICS

of canvassing are well laid out in a long letter attributed to Quintus Cicero, and purportedly addressed by him to his brother Marcus when he sought election to the consulship in 65 or 64 BC:

Consider these three things: what state this is, what you are seeking and who you are. Then every day, as you descend to the forum, you must say to yourself, 'I am a new man: I am standing for the consulship; this is Rome.' The political newness of your name you will overcome to a large extent by your reputation as a speaker. ... Next, let the number and quality of your friends be apparent.

(*On Canvassing for the Consulship* 1)

The impression is of a club devoted to the self-advancement of its members despite frequent rifts over the composition of the committee and officers.

For young men in a hurry there was an alternative, if risky, route to rapid prestige – or, depending on your point of view, notoriety – by seeking election as a tribune of the plebs. The principle that the Roman people as a whole had the power to protect their own fortunes was expressed constitutionally in a somewhat incongruous body, the plebeian assembly (*concilium plebis*). This self-constituted and self-governing body was a relic of a struggle back in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, when magistracies had been confined to a small group of families distinguished as patricians and the rest of the populace (the plebeians) had resorted to joint action to prevent arbitrary abuse of magisterial power. They extorted from the patricians greater opportunities for rich plebeians to embark on political careers. Such battles had long been won, and the majority of the state's magistrates by 50 BC were plebeians; only the name *patricius* lingered on as an honorific zealously guarded by the declining number of families entitled to boast it. But the plebeian assembly still met regularly and elected its own leaders, plebeian tribunes and aediles, whose brief now was in essence to act as ombudsmen for individual Romans against the state. Such tribunes could be of any age. Since they enjoyed two further privileges – first, that of presenting motions to the plebeian assembly which, if passed, had the force of law, and, second, that of vetoing on the people's behalf laws proposed in the main state assemblies – the position might seem to offer great opportunities for advancement and self-publicity for a young man. Such indeed had proved to be the case not infrequently during the 50s BC and, indeed, ever since the tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus in 133 BC.

POLITICAL METHODS

Analysis of the Roman constitution in the somewhat cynical fashion presented above was more characteristic of Roman politicians in their evaluation of the careers of political enemies than in their discussions of their own careers. In advocating policies and supporting individuals, the Romans shared a distinctive vocabulary.⁴ All could appeal to an instinctive conservatism. Any action that accorded with ancestral custom (*mos maiorum*) was praiseworthy.

THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF ROME

Alongside this notion went an idealization of an imaginary heroic past, when Roman peasant soldiers had embodied simple, sterling qualities. All could appeal to freedom (*libertas*), a term as slippery in antiquity as now; for politicians it sometimes meant little more than the right to advocate any policy they wished without fear.⁵ All advocated promotion of the *gloria* of the Roman state, which meant more than just preserving the *status quo*. The Roman state had been geared to war throughout its history, and the extension of Roman power by military conquest was accepted by everyone. All accepted the authority of the laws, which were regarded with great reverence, as if the wording of a law alone could cure social and political ills: hence the stream of legislation passed in the 50s BC in an attempt to curb violence, bribery and murder on the streets of Rome by the simple expedient of defining them as illegal.

In their judgement of the qualities desirable in a political leader, Romans showed an essential unanimity. Skill in generalship, or at any rate success in war, was universally admired. Hence the extraordinary praise by Cicero of the conquests in Gaul by Julius Caesar, a man he cordially disliked but whose right to continue campaigning he vigorously upheld:

Gaius Caesar's strategy I see to be far different; for he believed not only that it was necessary to wage war against those who he saw were already in arms against the Roman people, but also that all Gaul must be subjected to our sway. And so he has fought with the fiercest peoples, in gigantic battles against the Germans and Helvetians, with the greatest success. He has terrified, confined, and subdued the rest, and accustomed them to obey the empire of the Roman people. ... Previously, we possessed merely a path through Gaul, members of the senate; the other parts were held by peoples either unfriendly to this empire, or untimely, or unknown, or certainly savage, uncivilized and warlike – peoples which everyone always desired to be smashed and subdued.

(*On the Consular Provinces* 13.32)

Romans conceived of their empire in the Republican period not as a fixed territory but as a sphere of influence, defined by the limits of Roman power. There has been much debate as to why the Romans expanded their dominion across the Mediterranean. The defensive model, according to which Rome acquired territories haphazardly in the course of protecting its own interests, has largely given way to an explanation based on the aggression of a state driven by the ambitions of leading senators for whom success in war brought economic, social and personal rewards. Both models may be partially correct, since the circumstances leading to foreign wars over the long period of Roman expansion undoubtedly differed from one occasion to another.⁶

In any case, the acme of political success was envisaged as the triumph, a ceremonial procession through the streets of Rome to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol. The details of the ceremony, as depicted over the centuries in a variety of literary and artistic media, varied greatly, but the underlying notion was that the victorious general should be dressed in regal fashion and

accompanied not only by his army and a parade of captives and spoils but by the senate, magistrates, and people.⁷ Acceptance of the imperialist ethos which justified Roman rule over other people seems to have been more or less universal among the free population of the city of Rome itself.

The prestige of the powerful was advertised not least through visual imagery. Late-Republican silver coins often bear images with historical allusions and political themes. It was common for the magistrates responsible for production of a coin issue to depict the past glories of their own ancestors, such as their military victories or the monuments they had built. The public space of Rome was filled with monuments, from basilicas to temples and triumphal arches, erected by senators for self-glorification.

Such visual reminders of Rome's leading generals exposed the tension between the empire of the people as a whole and the ambitions of individuals. The speaker's platform located in the *comitium* at Rome was the place where politicians made their case to the people, but it was also home to memorials to great generals of the past, such as a gilded equestrian monument dedicated to the dictator Sulla. Sculptural reliefs like those from the Piazza della Consolazione in Rome, depicted an array of military paraphernalia. Rome's first permanent stone theatre, erected by Pompeius Magnus in 55 BC, contained fourteen female personifications of the nations he had conquered, creating the impression that he had brought the entire Mediterranean world under his sway. Competition between Roman politicians to excel on the battlefield was thus enshrined in their monuments in Rome.⁸

Besides such militaristic virtues, skill in oratory was also highly prized: in a society without mass printing, political ideas were mostly disseminated by public speeches and passed on afterwards by word of mouth. Oratorical ability was crucial in the pursuit of political power.⁹ In his *Dialogue on Oratory* 36, Tacitus looked back to the rewards available for effective orators in the Late Republic:

The more influence a man could wield by his powers of speech, the more readily did he attain to high office, the farther did he, when in office, outstrip his colleagues, the more did he gain favour with the great, authority with the senate, name and fame with the common people.

Wealth in itself did not bring prestige, and over-indulgence was described by some as positively bad, but the leisure (*otium*) provided by a sufficient income was reckoned part of the necessary equipment for intellectual endeavour and therefore political power. Roman society had never witnessed the promotion of a leader from the impoverished, or even the artisanal class of free citizens, and when Spartacus led a slave rebellion in Italy in 72–71 BC, the free peasants sided with the state in its suppression. It was generally expected that possession of wealth would be advertised by conspicuous expenditure on fellow citizens. The aim of such 'evergetism' was not so much charity as

insurance in the winning of political support. Those who were politically threatened might accordingly be particularly lavish, as was M. Vipsanius Agrippa in 33 BC, according to Cassius Dio:

Agrippa agreed to be made aedile and without taking anything from the public treasury repaired all the public buildings and all the streets, cleaned out the sewers, olive oil and salt to all, and furnished the baths free of charge throughout the year for the use of both men and women; and in connection with the many festivals of all kinds which he gave ... he hired barbers, so that no one should be at any expense for their services.

(*History of Rome* 49.43.1–3)

It was taken for granted that the very poor would not benefit from any handouts. Those individuals who were specially singled out to receive particular gifts might consider themselves to be designated thereby as friends (*amici*) of the donor, although outsiders, and doubtless in private the donor, viewed such an unequal friendship rather as that of a patron to his client, mirroring the close formal ties which bound an ex-slave to his former master.¹⁰ Perhaps not surprisingly, the rhetoric of Republican politics thus tended to be bland and imprecise. Men praised *virtus*, which could mean anything from courage to probity. They encouraged energy (*strenuitas*), but abhorred its excess (*ambitio*). Loath to admit the selfish causes that bound them, they might describe themselves and their friends simply as 'the good' (*boni*) or 'the best men' (*optimates*). Even pure self-regard could be honoured with the title *dignitas* (dignity), without self-consciousness. At times, Roman politicians in the Late Republic, with their great estates and hordes of retainers of slaves and freedmen, could behave much like medieval barons in the wilful self-interest of their policies.

And yet the public speeches of politicians in the 50s BC reveal a continuing respect for the constitutional theory with which this survey began, namely, the right of the Roman people to control their own destiny. It was to the interest of the state, not of the individual, or of classes or pressure groups, that politicians appealed in seeking support or election. In doing so they put forward policies on specific issues of foreign and domestic policy on which the people might be expected to have a view, not least, in the former case, because in the Republican period they would be likely to serve in the armies which would put such policies into operation. It could prove worthwhile wooing the people in this way. In the tribal assembly, the rich could best afford to leave their farms regularly to vote, and their influence could predominate, especially in the decisions of the rural tribes, since there were 31 rural tribes to four urban ones. In the centuriate assembly, the better-off constituted the centuries which voted first, and if their votes were unanimous, the poor would not be called upon to vote. But when the vote of the richer centuries was split, particularly in elections for office, then the vote of even the poorest centuries

could be vital for political success.¹¹ Voting aside, political rhetoric addressed a non-constitutional but no less real factor in Roman political life: the power of the urban mob to intimidate or cheer and to create the whole atmosphere surrounding a politician in a political system whose physical arena was the astonishingly small area of Rome around the forum and the senate house (the *curia*).¹²

4

CAESAR TO AUGUSTUS, 50 BC-AD 14

LAST YEARS OF JULIUS CAESAR

When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in January 49 BC, he inaugurated the autocracy of the Caesars.¹ With great candour, the opening chapters of his account of the civil war between his forces and those of Pompeius Magnus reveal stark personal motives alongside a more respectable concern for the Roman Republic. Typically writing of himself in the third person, he gives his motives for fighting in a speech made to his troops:

'As for myself,' he said, 'I have always reckoned the dignity of the Republic of first importance and preferable to life. I was indignant that a benefit conferred on me by the Roman people was being insolently wrested from me by my enemies.'
(*Civil War* 1.9)

Caesar plunged the Roman world into war to protect his own affronted *dignitas* (*Civil War* 1.7), but the outcome of three years of bloody fighting was far more than the appeasement of a hurt. It was nothing less than the establishment of the road to monarchy. It was no accident that Suetonius' series of imperial biographies began with Julius Caesar – not the first member of the Caesar family to hold office, nor yet the first to rule as later emperors did, but the first Caesar to rule alone.

Caesar's rhetoric in the seizure of power was, naturally enough, entirely in accordance with the Republican traditions within which he had made his mark. A scion of a patrician family, whose father had reached the praetorship, he had experienced no difficulty in enjoying a successful if unspectacular career until 63 BC. Then his election as *pontifex maximus*, the leading priest of the Roman state cults, propelled him to prominence, not least because of the unashamed use of bribery on his behalf by his powerful friend, M. Licinius Crassus, who had been consul in 70 BC. Still, his achievement of a consulship in 59 BC would have aroused no surprise if he had not traded on the opportunities provided by his occupation of high office for the year to do favours to the most influential ex-magistrates of the time: his benefactor, Crassus, and his future rival, Pompeius. This political accommodation, known