

Oratory in action

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Margaret Thatcher, the dominant political personality in Britain in the 1980s and the subject of the preceding chapter, figures prominently in Lynette Hunter's wide-ranging discussion of the fate of oratory in a media age. Although the Thatcherites were ridiculed, especially in their early days, as unworldly enthusiasts and members of an esoteric political sect, Thatcher herself never lost sight of the importance of her public personality, of seizing the ground of 'common sense', and of creating an *ethos* which allowed her to assert an identity of interests with 'ordinary people'. In this way oratory in its various modern forms was at the heart of the Thatcherite project: it activated ideology and made it a persuasive political force.

Thatcher's favoured self-image was that of an authentic interpreter of the wishes of the people. But who were (and indeed are) this 'people' to whom orators like Thatcher appeal? In the rhetoric of populism, 'the people', at first sight an unusually inclusive audience, is often defined by what it excludes. In the name of the people populist orators attack what they see as entrenched interests and interest groups (Tony grandees, intellectuals, trades unionists, the public sector), vilify enemies both outside and within, and pour scorn on the defenders of cultural difference. Thatcher's populism thus illustrates (but does not exhaust) Lynette Hunter's thesis that public speech today ignores diversity and assumes common ground rather than arguing for it. In developing this argument in the contemporary context Hunter also returns us to some of

rhetoric's enduring issues and themes. How is the orator to win trust without resorting to simple flattery or appealing to a narrow sense of self-interest? How is the orator to unify an audience while respecting differences among those who compose it? How is the orator to persuade without manipulation, and to shape opinion without excluding the audience from the scene of argument?

Our society now has the media for the complete public speaker, the contemporary rhetorician, the modern Cicero on video who tries to speak for us all. Yet if orators in some societies, such as the First Nations of North America, are the source of the social, cultural, political, and religious guidelines for their societies, and are respected if not honoured for this skill, then what has happened to our own politicians? Public speeches, say those of Winston Churchill, have conventionally been part of our valued literary heritage. But as radio and television have opened up, political communication has become more and more a combined verbal and dramatic art for the many, and is often distrusted.

I would like to argue that there is a set of unspoken but widely understood rules of thumb that have habitually been used to assess the value or otherwise of political performance in the media, and that these seem to be contradicted in complex ways by the increasingly diverse make-up of people with access to political power. Because contemporary political rhetoric must be all things to all peoples, it tends to gut the issues of any real debate, to offer to speak for us rather than to us, hence weakening our commitment to political action either by ourselves or by those acting on our behalf.

Classical political rhetoric, from which Parliamentary democracy has got most of its techniques for political oratory, is set up for a circumscribed democracy, in fact an oligarchy. Greece and Rome were slave states, and Rome especially depended on a slave economy. The key element of oratory at the time, and still nowadays, is the ability of the orator to establish common ground with the audience. It must trust the orator. People communicated orally, so if you were listening to a political speech you could nudge your neighbour, interrupt, and make your feelings known by

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Video Cicero

LYNETTE HUNTER



walking out. If today the orator still has to maintain trust, the political constituency is rarely any longer directly present.

A hallmark of Tony Blair's rhetoric in the 1997 election was precisely to establish a trustworthy, recognisable *ethos*. One party political broadcast opens with two slightly more than middle-aged women speaking with a reserved enthusiasm (the slight reticence provides a sense of considered opinion), and moves on to show Blair in his kitchen, in his shirt-sleeves, discussing the way that he and his father had had political differences from the beginning, because his father voted Conservative. The sequence closes with Blair saying in an understated and good-humoured way that his father had changed his mind. The absence of triumphalism is key to our approval. Blair is implying that decent right-thinking people of his father's generation who voted Conservative did so at a time when the Labour Party was not offering them a suitable approach, almost that their influence was responsible for changing the attitude to what Labour thought it should be. Given the urgency of swinging large numbers of voters from Conservative to Labour, the subtle implications were vital. The broadcast is also aiming at another constituency, the middle-class left of centre who traditionally might have identified themselves with Labour but who had been drifting. Again, the persuasion is subtle as Blair is shown playing football with a group of young people, probably around nine or ten years of age, presumably at a community-organised training event; the young people are both boys and girls. In this one sequence around Blair, a vision of possible unity is constructed of a different kind of Labour Party: gender equity, community support, parental responsibility, and, most important, a breakdown in hierarchy as the potential Prime Minister engages in an ordinary activity.

Establishing common ground is not very difficult when you speak to people with the same way of life and similar expectations. In Rome, Cicero was speaking to people with roughly the same income and status, and all of them were men. Just so, at party conferences today, despite a diversity of background there is normally some kind of political consensus. Extracts from the 1992 Conservative Party conference show John Major speaking to the self-selected Conservative core, who stand in for the nation at large who have just voted for a Conservative government yet again. Yet Major speaks not of specific issues but of general themes such as empire and glory, reinforced with music by Elgar, culturally recognisable at the time as Conservative owing to the long association of Elgar with the flag-waving

finale to the last night of the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall. Major calls on large themes of patriotism at a time when voters were beginning to get disencharmed with Conservative policies, asking them to look at 'the bigger picture' which is more likely to unite them. Significantly the audience he is addressing is lit to recede into semi-darkness, tinted blue, as the light focuses on him alone, positioning him as the one who will lead them into the light.

In contrast to both these examples, of Blair and Major, think about Labour in the 1980s: a party with a healthy diversity which partially represented the growing diversity of communities in the UK, came head-on up against entrenched strategies of classical political rhetoric which do not admit diversity. Although certainly not the only reason, this lock into an obsolete rhetorical structure contributed to the way Labour became obstinately divisive, and splintered.

WHY IS IT THAT CLASSICAL POLITICAL RHETORIC DOES NOT SEEM TO BE ABLE TO DEAL WITH DIVERSITY? THE ORATOR AND PLAUSIBLE ARGUMENT: ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND

One of the issues important to rehearse is the difference made in classical rhetoric between probable argument and the plausible rhetoric of opinion. Probable rhetoric works first by suggesting a set of common grounds about which it invites debate, discussion, and finally, in some form, agreement. Only then can it move on to the persuasion proper. In contrast, plausible opinion assumes common ground, assumes that the audience will think in roughly the same way as the speaker, and launches immediately into argument.¹ Aristotle claimed that plausible rhetoric was appropriate only to closed communities such as scientists (seekers after knowledge of different kinds in closed communities), and was not for use in social or political situations where there will be a diverse audience.² Plausible rhetoric leaves it all too easy to claim that certain ideas are absolutely true, because they fit inside the taken-for-granted grounds. What the distinction adds up to is one between rhetoric that speaks *to* us (probable) and rhetoric that speaks *for* us (plausible).

Cicero's *De oratore*, which developed a rhetoric for the legal courts, offered an analogy for political rhetoric in a state substantially different from Aristotle's, especially in terms of its size. The population of Rome

was much greater than that of fourth-century Athens, the land the Romans ruled was much more far-flung, and a substantial part of the population lived in appalling poverty and extremity.³ There was much more potential for slave rebellion in Rome, and indeed by the start of Cicero's career there had been two slave uprisings. A number of historians argue that in the aftermath of Sulla's 'reforms', which wiped out many governing families but also expanded the Senate from three hundred to six hundred, the ruling group in Rome became much more diverse. Cicero's particular skill was in the construction of a character, or *ethos*, for the speaker that would appeal to a broader number of people – still only the ruling group, but not just aristocrats. The primary focus of his book *De oratore* is on the creation of a speaking voice that others could trust, believe, and accept as 'one of them'. He says:

Now nothing in oratory, Catulus, is more important than to win for the orator the favour of his hearer, and to have the latter so affected as to be swayed by something resembling a mental impulse . . . For men decide far more problems by hate, or love, or lust, or rage, or sorrow, or joy, or hope, or fear, or illusion . . . than by reality, or authority, or any legal standard, or judicial precedent, or statute . . . A potent factor in success, then, is for the characters, principles, conduct and course of life, both of those who are to plead cases and of their clients, to be approved, and conversely those of their opponents condemned; and for the feelings of the tribunal to be won over, as far as possible, to goodwill towards the advocate and the advocate's client as well.⁴

All rhetoric has to construct an *ethos* that the audience will trust, but the focus on this construction, so that the audience is manipulated into acceptance rather than considered understanding, is a major step toward a political rhetoric of plausibility that speaks for and not to its audience. Harold Gotoff notes of Cicero with rather overstated relish:

Every rhetorical stance, every anecdote, every argument, every inflection of a speech, and the manner in which each of these is presented, is calculated to control and direct the attitude of a defined audience in a particular situation . . . The arguments Cicero puts forth, whether to elucidate or obfuscate, have the overriding goal of convincing his audience. All is fair in love, war, and oratory . . . The voice we hear in the speeches is not that of a teacher or a philosopher. Its goal is not education, but psychological manipulation.⁵

Not that Cicero was the first or only person to do this, by no means. However, his skill, fame, and writing became so influential to classical

Roman culture and later on to Renaissance European society that many people imitated his style and his work became central to an education in rhetoric in both periods. Furthermore Cicero was one of the first in western philosophy to separate the State and the government, and to argue explicitly that the function of the State is to preserve the accumulation of private property.⁶ Both elements can be connected with attempts to stabilise the diversity of voices newly come to government, and anxiety about social mobility.

Cicero's focus on the construction of plausible *ethos* is parallel to his concern with the State: both speak for rather than to. Their rhetoric is structured to manipulate into inclusion and assent rather than to persuade through discussion. With this kind of rhetoric there is always an unspoken, silent presence: that of the people who live outside this circle of assumptions. *Ethos* need not be of this cruel inclusionary or exclusionary character, but a focus on *ethos* at the expense of encouraging debate will tend toward the construction of closed circles of argument which accept rather than question common grounds. We can hear and watch him doing this in speech after speech. One of his first legal cases, and the one that brought him to fame, was the *Pro Roscio Amerino* (80 BC). Speaking in the wake of Sulla's killings, Cicero has to defend Roscius from the charge of killing his father, and he was fully expected to fail. In a textbook example of his later prescription, Cicero first sets up his own *ethos*, explaining why he, 'so young, inexperienced, and lacking authority, should have undertaken this case'; he had 'been pressed into service by his friends and under such circumstances could not refuse', that Roscius deserved the truth to be known, and finally that he was 'duty-bound' to defend him despite the heavy burden it would bring. He then moves on to praising the character of the jury, especially that of the presiding officer, and pulling them into his own sense of duty, asking them to lighten his burden because they are men of worth and wisdom. And finally he successfully characterises the prosecution itself as self-serving and criminal.⁷ Again, at the centre of his strategy is the construction of a closed circle of assent, which includes himself, the jury and Roscius as just, and excludes the prosecution as criminal. It is perhaps this, more than anything else, that convinces the court to acquit.

It is important that, lacking any personal common ground, or any political position, Cicero draws on the functions of the State and appeals to law and order to create that common ground. The tactic is one that has

been fully taken up by contemporary politics. There is a riveting analysis by Justin Lewis of two interviews with Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and in 1981, about riots in London, which demonstrates how this usually works well, but can be a problem.⁸ The 1979 interview shows her using the framework of law and order to contain the Southall riots in which Blair Peach was killed. Her prime tactic is to condemn the activities of the National Front not as evidence of racial hatred but as an attack on civilisation, law, and the police. In light of the recent events surrounding the death of Stephen Lawrence, we could have wished for a more searching analysis, but she was successful at the time because she was still able to manipulate the public feeling around the disruptions of the late 1970s, and their issues of law and order, that had brought her to power.

However, only two years later, in an interview with Alistair Burnet about the Brixton riots, she is deprived of this tactic. Lewis details with precision the moves and counter-moves with which Thatcher attempts once again to call on law and order, and those of Burnet who keeps shifting the ground away from the idea that the rioters are criminals and beyond help, to the idea that they may be responding to a complex set of issues to do with racism, and attendant unemployment and discrimination in all areas. He finally points out the lack of trust in the police, which completely undermines her *ethos* of law and order, and she is reduced to emotional rebuttal and the use of tautology (the refuge of those who cannot see outside their own small worlds): that these people are criminals and therefore they will behave in criminal ways – itself a piece of racist comment.

THE ORATOR AND THE NEED FOR A VICE: ESTABLISHING COMMON WEAKNESS

When the humanists of the Renaissance rediscovered the classics, they became fascinated by this idea of *ethos*. Among the Italian city-states, each prince had his rhetor or orator. The power of Machiavelli was in part due to his combining the two activities. Much of his advice book, *The Prince*, is concerned with self-constructed *ethos*: how the Prince must appear to his subjects in order to maintain his rule. Machiavelli points out that no one is perfect, one man may be generous and another greedy, one faithless and one true to his word, and so on. He continues:

Every one, I know, will admit that it would be most laudable for a Prince to

be endowed with all of the above qualities that are reckoned good; but since it is impossible for him to possess or constantly practise them all, the conditions of human nature not allowing it, he must be discreet enough to know how to avoid the infamy of those vices that would deprive him of his government, and, if possible, be on his guard also against those which might not deprive him of it.⁹

In other words, you shouldn't hesitate to break the social rules of behaviour if you are threatened, but you should make sure that the vices you indulge in will not destroy your plausible *ethos*, and cost you your power.

One of the most obvious examples of this advice has been Bill Clinton, but Clinton's *ethos* as President of the United States always gave evidence of something other than manipulation. The manipulative *ethos* is short term. It is ideal for court cases and for passing political issues, but not for long-term political success. Unlike many high-profile politicians in the United States, or for that matter in England (the focus of this section rather than Britain), Clinton has a specific local base – albeit large – in the southern states of the USA, which he draws on for his *ethos* (where do you geographically place Blair?). He has been called, by an African-American writer (Toni Morrison), 'the first black president of the United States'; he is the southern white man reformed, helping to eradicate the history of race guilt from the country. And for all the questions about his financial dealings and his sexual activities, this local *ethos* held firm. At the same time he did, according to Machiavelli, choose his vice well. Throughout his testimony to Senate on the Monica Lewinsky affair he appears to have refrained from claiming common ground with his accusers. However, this does not say to his audience that he is bad, indeed it implies that he has the sense of decency and decorum to recognise that there is a social code critical of such activity, despite the fact that many in his audience will identify with it. In other words, he presents himself as supportive of that social code, but failing, as all humans do fail from time to time. The effect of this was to encourage the audience to claim common ground with him for itself, which it showed itself keen to do.

Giving an interview directly after the Senate vote on impeachment, Clinton handled his audience in just this way and received rousing applause. The very next day he addressed an even wider audience in his State of the Union address for 1999. In the chamber seated in front of him sat many of the men and women who voted against him the day before, and seated immediately behind him were Vice-President Al Gore and Dennis Hester,

the man who led the impeachment proceedings. Clinton's control of his persona was so clear that he was able to use his call to national unity as a not-so-implicit call for renewed support for his presidency and himself personally. The President declares, addressing Hester but with his back toward him, 'At your swearing in you asked us all to work together in a spirit of civility and bipartisanship. Mr Speaker let's do exactly that', and turns to shake Hester's hand. It is a gesture Hester cannot refuse to reciprocate. The look on Al Gore's face says it all; he can barely suppress a smile of astonished admiration. Clinton was a consummate Machiavellian rhetor, and I do not use the term in a derogatory manner.

THE ORATOR AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: ESTABLISHING COMMON CAUSE

To return briefly to the Renaissance: English commentators on political behaviour are clearly fascinated by the potential in manipulative *ethos*. There is a distinct shift in advice books from the early part of the sixteenth century, where many still want to maintain the idea of the naturally 'good' man, to the latter, where there is increasing awareness, due not only to Machiavelli but to other European commentators, of the power of rhetoric (written and orated) to sway people whether or not the orator is good or bad. The concern is intimately tied to anxiety about the rise of the merchant class, and even to their assimilation into the aristocracy. Earlier advice books assume that you can behave like a courtly person only if you are born to it. The later books recognise that, in effect, you could learn how to behave as an aristocrat even if you were only a trader: the ultimate example of deceitful *ethos*. George Puttenham, writing in *The Art of English Poetrie* (1585), evades the problem by saying that English courtiers are of course good men, and only foreign ones are manipulative.¹⁰ However, the literature abounds with examples of deceitful rhetoric and with advice on how to recognise it.

At the same time, Elizabeth I became more and more remote, to the extent that it has been argued that her government was a strictly limited monarchy.¹¹ In the latter part of her reign there was enormous attention to the development of the cult of Elizabeth, which should be seen not so much as a cultivation of individual *ethos* but as a solidifying of a representation of the state into a static image: nowhere more obviously found than from the portraits of the Queen painted from a cut-out representation.¹²

When Hobbes describes the state as a Leviathan which represents all the people, he is talking about a political structure that has flipped from the plausible into the absolute, by not only ignoring but also obscuring the fact that there may be alternative grounds for belief and action, depriving the individual or community of any choice of a different way of life. This is a shift of utmost importance to the effects of Ciceronian plausible *ethos*, which was intended to work within a completely different, more flexible and almost mythological, State structure. It is a shift from an *ethos* that speaks *for* us to one that speaks *at* us.

Again it is significant that during this period in England there was great social mobility, exacerbated by Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. From the sixteenth into the seventeenth centuries there were increasing numbers of people gaining access to political power, and, since it was impossible to have a direct democracy because of the geography of the country as well as the sheer number of people eligible, England developed a representative democracy. The voters became 'represented' in Parliament. Central to the idea of representation was the fact that the interests of those representing and those being represented were not far apart, they had similar expectations and lifestyles. Variations in opinion were corralled into the structure of oppositional parties. The idea of a plausible *ethos* remained effective within each party, and continued to be maintained alongside the gradual formation of the absolute *ethos* of the State, or ideology.¹³

However, with the gradual extension of the franchise especially during the latter part of the nineteenth century, culminating in full voting rights in 1928 in England, the structure for this kind of rhetoric changes beyond recognition. More and more people enter the realms of the 'represented' yet those representing them often have little in common with them any more. Various strategies were developed to cope with this diversity of interest, some being rather crude like 'pork-barrel' politics, which works by promising those who vote for you some kind of preferment. But other influential strategies have focused either on the State, and issues of law and order and property, as we saw with the example of Thatcher above, or on the nation, particularly on issues of economic and military war. These two elements are of course intertwined because the definition of a citizen is one who can be called to military action in defence of the nation, and ideology defines many of the ways in which citizens are represented.

War is enormously useful to political *ethos*, and there is a cynical view that war is often maintained as a viable option because it encourages people

to coalesce around a common cause and eradicate their differences. Certainly, the *ethos* of a politician such as Winston Churchill revolved around the centrality of war, and had difficulty adjusting to the different demands of the postwar period. Thatcher was commonly accused of pursuing the Falklands war partly because her political credibility was waning; in any event it did have the effect of bringing people together under the Conservative wing once more. Her *ethos* through the preceding several years was also one that exploited the imagery of war in terms of war against the Labour Party. Yet she too became a media victim, destroyed by her *ethos*, from the iron lady of 'the lady's not for turning' to the steel lady of no compassion. John Major's *ethos* was a world away from this aggressive and confrontational stance. Indeed his characterisation of his political voice was so tenuous that for a long time he was exceptionally difficult to satirise, until the cartoonist Steve Bell and some political comedians realised the potential for caricature in the bathetic – Major's apparent tendency to respond to public concern with banal solutions like the 'Cone Phone line' for motorists. Bell reduced Major to someone who always wears their underpants on the outside because they have nothing to hide. This was of course before Edwina Currie told the world of her affair with Major, to which Steve Bell replied by stuffing Major's underpants a little more generously.

THE DIFFICULTY OF THE ABSENCE OF WAR

What each of these party leaders has had to contend with is the absence of war. The issue surfaced rather starkly in the British media in 1998 when Clinton was accused of becoming involved in Iraq in order to deflect interest away from his own actions, and several respected media commentators here seemed implicitly to be suggesting that war might be a good thing to focus people's attention on their relatively high standard of living. Initially, Tony Blair had the same problem, of coalescing public opinion not around war but around peace. At the Nato-Russia summit of 1997 he said, 'Mine is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war: conveniently forgetting the Falklands war and the British involvement in the Iraq crisis of 1991, presumably because they were mistakes, wars undertaken on behalf of the British people but not with their whole-hearted participation. To forge a different kind of national unity he called,

in the time-honoured fashion, on law and order and protection of property. But also, because he is Labour, he had to call on issues of social concern. His response was cautious in all areas except that of the family and of personal morality, which have become central to his *ethos*. Unfortunately, the visible icon of this *ethos* was the disastrous Millennium Dome, a pantheon to the idea of a nation as a culturally unifying expression of people with similar interests in stability and property, and a similar moral agenda.

However, during the Kosovo crisis in 1999 Blair brought this *ethos* into direct combination with a rhetoric of war. In a Public Broadcasting Service interview with Jim Lehrer (23 April 1999) he described Milosevic as a 'dictator' who 'has done some very terrible things', placing his strong condemnation side by side with colloquial understatement. On the complex problems of ethnic cleansing and what he called 'racial genocide', he says directly and simply, 'We either act or we don't'. When he is questioned on his readiness to take up a warlike stance given that he has never been directly involved in war before, he again uses calculated banality, speaking of his 'very very heavy heart', and saying 'we're doing it because it is the right thing to do'. This ability to position himself as 'just another bloke' – someone saying things that your neighbour might say and saying them in a way your neighbour might say them, someone voicing opinions that could be your own – is also perceived as morally truthful. The BBC News on 23 April 1999 (18.05) refers to Blair's response to Kosovo as one expressive of his 'strong Christian convictions'.

Two years later, in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon and the failed attack on Camp David, this ability to bring together the personal with a rhetoric of war becomes more sophisticated. In Blair's address to the Labour Party conference shortly after the attacks on 1 October 2001, he draws on the absence of a specific nationally located 'enemy' and stresses the interrelation among nations all over the globe, saying, 'what has come out of this is a sense of community and international interdependence', and that the 'world community must show as much its capacity for compassion as for force'. He develops this in the speech into a brief commentary on European unity and the need for the euro: as Mark Leonard remarked in the *Observer* (14 April 2002), 11 September paved the way for the euro, with even the eurosceptic *Daily Telegraph* running the headline 'A New Currency for a New World Order'. Words such as 'community' and 'compassion' anchor the *ethos* in the

personal and in 'human values'. At the same time they hide the false analogy made between the response of an individual and that of a nation. They imply a direct participation of citizens in global governance, whereas it is necessarily mediated, and not even through an elected 'representative' but through a State-implemented construct known as the 'nation'.

Significantly there is no commentary this time on his Christian perspective, which in the reading of the attacks as motivated by Islamic disenchantment with the power of the United States could have been inflammatory. This loss of an important element in his earlier *ethos* is replaced by even more emphasis on the private individual, and Blair notes, 'For people with work to do, family life to balance, mortgages to pay, careers to further, pensions to provide, the yearning is for order and stability and if it doesn't exist elsewhere, it is unlikely to exist here'. The argument, rather blatantly, suggests that war is necessary in order to maintain the stability necessary to pay one's mortgage. What is interesting is that war is no longer for the glorification of nations which in the past pitted themselves and their citizens against each other. Instead, in this global world with more nebulous 'enemies', war is undertaken by individuals in order to protect their property. The speech cleverly proposes that, far from being reduced to a cultural manifestation, the nation is a military conduit for effective action in maintaining global law and order. This is a substantial and significant development in understanding the relationship between the individual and the nation. For many of us, relations with global power are unthinking and direct, for example, if one buys a coffee from Starbucks. The implication in this speech is that the nation can function as a mediator between the individual and global power, by being the most effective way of maintaining the stability necessary for the protection of property.

The most worrying aspect of Blair's speech to the Labour Party conference in 2001 was his remarks on Africa. Following directly from his commentary on the attacks, and implicitly suggesting a connection, he speaks of the need to 'sort out' Africa. He goes on to describe Africa as a scar, saying that 'if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it'. Even were there direct connections between the perpetrators of the attacks and 'Africa', Africa is a large and diverse continent with many countries which do not necessarily think of themselves as needing to be 'sorted out', or as being primarily the exploited victims of European imperialism. Blair may of course have been intending to draw parallels between the disaffection of those who have and those who have not in the

world, especially with the upcoming summit on Africa held in the summer of 2002 on the horizon. However, the more direct implication is that we have a responsibility to pre-empt instability, if necessary to go to war with countries which 'might' put our mortgages at risk. This position informed the events of the following year during which Blair gradually came round to the support of Bush's aggressive policy toward Iraq.

Quite apart from the conflation of the represented citizen of the nation with the unrepresented member of a global polity, the idea that what defines 'representable' citizens is their ownership of a mortgage, or that this fact of their lives might outweigh moral, social, and political concerns for other people, excludes a large percentage of the populace. What about the ever-increasing number of families housed in bed-sits, let alone the move to renting rather than buying? The UK is filled with people of many diverse ways of life and belief. What is intriguing is both how the rhetoric manages to lull a majority of representable people into acceptance, and, in a world of greater and supposedly desirable democratic access to all, how do the unrepresented get heard?

THE MEDIA AND DIVERSITY

While Blair has been somewhat more successful in calling on the moral majority than was Major, he still has a problem with the fact that the UK is a country of difference and diversity; after all he is the man who has *unified* the Labour Party in face of its earlier 'factionalism'. I would argue that in England the problem with difference is largely due to the media, to the position of those who own it, to its pervasiveness and to the techniques that have become common to its development. Anyone who has been interviewed for radio or television, or who has watched a discussion group on television, will know that the speakers are expected to keep what they have to say pre-digested and to the point. The medium is not there to encourage discussion or thoughtful debate. A clear indication of the rhetorical effects of this development is found in the following statement from a most helpful book by Joan Mulholland, *The Language of Negotiation* (p. 99):

Interviews of such brevity are made understandable to their audiences, because the media utilise society's general stereotypical perceptions of the interviewee and of the interview's form and content as a framework.

This stress on the necessity for the stereotypical runs through all her advice for the interviewee, interviewer, and the interview form and content. I offer an extensive quotation, which is worth reading right the way through, as an example of problems that may occur:

An interviewer might ask such a question as 'Won't that badly affect ordinary families?', expecting everyone to understand that there is something called a family which is everywhere much the same, without questioning the assumption by asking, for example, 'How exactly do you understand the term "family"?', or 'Do you mean the single parent family or the dual parent family?' An interviewee who asked such questions, or who answered the original question with 'It depends what kind of family you mean', would not only confuse the interviewer but could also face problems with audience understanding, until such time as society generally accepts the fact that the 'family' no longer has a single meaning.

Expectations also exist in the audience's minds as to what content the interview will have, what topics will be raised, and what views will be expressed, and any deviations may be resisted as troublesome. For example, people have a standard view of a banker, and every banker is expected to look and sound the part. When confronted by a banker who differs in some way, they could miss much of what is being said while making adjustments to their mental stereotype. Such stereotyping can occur with respect to every element of the interview's content: the matters mentioned, the actions taken, the attitudes expressed, and so on.¹⁴

This kind of stereotyping is the culmination of plausible *ethos* production but it doesn't answer the needs of an enfranchised population that wants actively to be involved with political change. The lack of detail eviscerates the issue, denies debate, obscures the points of difficulty, and attempts to render all things understandable within the terms of the status quo. When Cicero adopted a similarly plausible *ethos*, he was speaking in a community that had already and by default of the political and legal system selected the terms on which it would argue. It was a small group with common interests, and he was communicating orally and could be responded to orally, indeed he was communicating in order that his audience would act. As he and his group learned to their cost, the exclusion of so many from access to effective government could lead only to violence — a lesson that really should have been learned by the twentieth century but people have an enormous capacity for arrogance. The effect of such plausible *ethos* in our time, where it is mediated far and wide, and where, because of the technology, its content can remain exactly the same no matter in what

different arena it is repeated, tends to limit people to saying the stereotypical, the bland, the evasively duplicitous, and weakens the audience's interest in political activity. Politicians speak as though we are all the same. They speak *for* us, not *to* us. But the technology they use turns what they might say *for* us into something spoken *at* us.

What has come to be known as 'grass-roots politics' usually tries to adopt a probable *ethos*, a persuasion or rhetoric that talks to us, engages us in consensus decision-making. And, most importantly, it encourages us to value difference. The problem is, how does this politics mesh with party politics? The Liberal Democrats have attempted to deal with this through proportional representation, which is a clear response to the issue of diversity that other countries have tried. Labour in the 1980s can be seen to be experimenting with having diverse voices within one party. However, the result was a disintegration in the face of the monolithic convention of plausible *ethos* which has dominated politics for centuries. The furore over 'spin-doctors', which reached a peak during 1998 and 1999 and still lingers on, is bewildering: politicians have been 'spinning' opinion since the beginning of recorded history. The main Labour mistake was to allow the spin to become seen in a media world devoted to stereotype that justifies itself by claiming that there is no alternative to the stereotype. Nevertheless, part of the problem was that the spin came from no located place that would make sense of it. Labour had all but moved to the position where it took its own plausible *ethos* for granted: living inside the tautology.

The satirist Rory Bremner, whose work displays extraordinary awareness of rhetorical complexity, played Blair being interviewed by Jon Snow, a real-life news presenter, in the middle of his first term of office. The figure of Blair begins to argue that the British public will have to do a little better to deserve the Labour government he leads, in fact that if they don't improve substantially they'll be lucky if Labour allow them to vote for the Party, 'and then where will they be?' Bremner precisely captures the mindset that locks itself into its own view of the world, and in the process articulates one of the problems the Labour Party had during the subsequent election: they took their support for granted. The arrogance attributed to Blair in that satirical commentary surfaced in a real interview carried out just prior to the 2001 election between the Prime Minister and Jeremy Paxman, an incisive interviewer for a magazine-style television news programme 'Newsnight', which is more concerned to investigate than to present the news. Paxman has a sound rhetorical habit of asking a question

in exactly the same way until he gets an answer. Were he to change the wording of the question, say in an attempt to clarify it or lead the interviewee, it would be an invitation to compare the two versions of the question and jump through the inevitable gaps. However, having already established this reputation in an interview with Michael Howard, in which Paxman asked him the same question fourteen times, he proceeds in one section of the interview with Blair to ask him the same question seven times or at least ten with variation, as Blair attempts to rephrase the question in a manner that would more appropriately suit his recent policies.¹⁵

The interview (part of which is transcribed as an appendix to this essay) contains many workmanlike displays of debate technique. There is evidence that Blair may be more used to open debate, and not as familiar with tight timing. He gives himself time to think by repeating phrases, and tries to control the direction of the interview by sending the question back again with variation and a smile. But these are both also helpful colloquial techniques that contribute to his genial persona. It is always easy to spot his weaknesses because his syntax collapses, with for example 'I don't really — it's not — it's not no it's not . . .', or 'the gap between those who, the person who earns the most . . .' This latter example is also interesting for a fluid confusion between the sounds of 'earns', 'owes', and 'owns' that trips up the repetition of what one assumes is 'earns' in the second half of the sentence.

But both Paxman and Blair are experienced in the genre, and fairly well-matched. If Paxman repeats a question, Blair keeps repeating his answer — in this sequence to the surreal end that he shifts the ground by finally suggesting that he is answering in 'the way I choose to answer'. Paxman catches up and accuses him, 'Prime Minister with respect people see you asked an absolutely straightforward question and they see you not answering it', to which Blair replies, equivocating, 'Yeah because I choose to answer it in the way I am answering it'. The casual 'Yeah' in the reply admits the problem, but the rest slides away into tautology. Paxman finally says, 'You're answering another question', and this change of tactic allows Blair to re-structure the framework. He takes charge of the debate by implying that he is clarifying previous evasion, 'Well, answering actually in the way that I want to answer it, and I'll tell you why I want to answer it in this way . . .', merely to go on to restate his previous answer. Paxman draws the topic to a close shortly after with the tart comment, 'Prime Minister I assume you want to be Prime Minister

I just want to be an interviewer [Blair: OK all right] so can we stick to that arrangement? . . .

What is interesting is that Rory Bremner subsequently did a satire on this interview, again with Jon Snow, again with a perceptive stripping away and exposure of rhetorical strategy. He has the actor playing Alistair Campbell, Blair's assistant, say, 'If he keeps on asking you the same question, keep giving him the same answer'. This time, however, he sustained a new tack on the character of Blair, underlining his propensity for naivety.¹⁶ To date naivety, or perhaps 'transparent honesty', is Blair's well-chosen 'vice', one with which his public can empathise and one that is always on the cusp of moral simplicity. He will not only be able to get away with this vice unless he falls into egregious error, but it works to his advantage.

Not only does the media stereotype, but it is also pervasive. I have watched a kind of political strategy which I imagine was in effect until the twentieth century in the UK, within the context of First Nations politics in Canada. The signal difference is that nineteenth-century political communities excluded up to 95 per cent of the population, and the First Nations communities exclude few of their members. First Nations people, particularly those with strong band organisations and in non-urban areas such as the Yukon Territories, often actively agree to be represented. Sometimes they select an advocate, usually at community level where the political interchanges are varied and where story is frequently a medium for persuasion. If story is used to persuade, then the audience will construct what they need from it, and should, if educated in their own culture, recognise the limitations and extents of that story. In other words the rhetoric of story is more likely, but not necessarily, going to invite a probable *ethos*. When those selected people go to district, provincial, or national assemblies, they will interpret the story depending on what is needed by that grouping, probably rephrasing into the structure of agonistic debate expected within the political discourse of western nation-states.¹⁷ And if they speak in smaller groups, in the small circles of government, they will speak differently again.

What is intriguing here is that the recording media are not necessarily present at many of these gatherings, so there is no way that the speakers can be called to account for inconsistency. The politicians can be all things to all people by being different things to different people, and with no loss of credibility. Indeed inconsistency is an inappropriate term to bring to

credibility here, for the whole point of probable *ethos* is to work on probably-the-best outcome rather than to prescribe an outcome from the beginning that will inevitably hit snags and resistances. That work can be learned from, and the lessons taken back into other groupings. A remarkably similar description was made by Edwina Currie of Major's political style within the party itself. She noted that

It dawned on us later that he managed to impress each of us that he agreed with whoever he was talking to. That's where the slipperiness comes in. Teddy Taylor told me [Major] had said to him, 'I think I ought to tell you in confidence that I'm the biggest Euroscopic in the cabinet'. And I tell you what, [Major] told us pro-Europeans how glad he was that we'd formed our group to help, and he was really pleased about it. It was absolutely breathtaking. (*Guardian*, 2.7, 4 October 2002)

In her analysis he did this kind of politicking precisely because he had no policies, and was therefore not accountable. The distinction here is that, although credibility is not an issue, accountability is. It is significant however, that this rhetorical technique only works in particularised locations. One of the essential ethical functions of the media is to insist on accountability. However, in England, the media also capitalise on the fact of political representation which implies similarity rather than difference. They record and replay the politician to the whole country, even though politicians have to respond to the needs of different communities. The media turn what they say into truths rather than probabilities, and all absolute truths are only the reverse face of the plausible.

But there is a third and more invidious problem with the media: that the business of mediation is effectively in the hands of people outside the community, the government, even the nation. Look at the sparring in 1999 of Rupert Murdoch and Tony Blair over the euro: Blair is said to have asked privately for Murdoch to temper the response of the *Sun* newspaper, which Murdoch owns, but Murdoch, who was and is well known for his anti-European feelings, refused to do so. Murdoch's *ethos* was exceptionally powerful, particularly because it was unseen and mediated through the press, that fourth estate of a State whose *ethos* obliterates the possibility of being aware of the sources of power and the potential for alternatives. The implication is that a rhetoric of difference would have enormous impact on a State ideology and its interconnections with the transnational, particularly on the accumulation of private property.

PROBLEMS WITH CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL RHETORIC

First, how do we connect the politics of community, using a rhetoric of difference, to government which uses a rhetoric of sameness? What strategies could bridge the gap?

Second, how do we accommodate a politics of diversity with different voices? And how do we choose from among those different voices when developing government strategy, so that we remain responsive and responsible to that difference?

Third, how do we connect politics with global finance, the rhetoric of government which is at least visible if stereotypical, to the rhetoric of the transnational corporation, which is frequently invisible? How do we relate the one which is responsible to its people to the other which is responsible to no one?¹⁸

The rhetoric of the government and of the State used to be quite close, largely for economic reasons. These days they have separated somewhat, partly again for economic reasons. Whereas post-Renaissance representations of citizens within a nation and the representations for subjects of the State were interconnected, now it's difficult to say how far representation of citizens carries weight when individuals are affected by changes in the State due to transnational rather than national issues. This may be the reason that the rhetoric of government has moved into the private: the private always used to be separate from public government, but increasingly it's become an issue. Maybe western nations recognise that the family is the basic unit of economy and of social stability in the nation, and therefore need to maintain it. Maybe States, both national and global, affirm this on one hand but subtly disrupt it on the other.

What we need is a new rhetor for our age. Perhaps the term 'advocacy'¹⁹ will be to the twenty-first century what 'inclusion' was for Cicero, or what 'representation' was for Hobbes. At the moment the Ciceronian *ethos* that speaks for us rather than to us is being overtaken by a Hobbesian *ethos* that speaks at us – and this at a time when we have moved on and need rhetorical strategies for dialogue, people speaking to each other, to make difference an active agent in the political world.

APPENDIX: BBC INTERVIEW BETWEEN JEREMY PAXMAN
AND TONY BLAIR, APRIL 2001

- P: Do you think that a company can make, er, too much in profits?
B: In what sense do you mean?
P: Do you think profits can ever be unjustifiably large?
B: I think they can be if they are monopoly profits which is why we for example taxed the privatised utilities, got the excess profits and put that to work in the new deal, but I don't believe for example that if you're acting in a competitive market it's the job of government to come along and tell a company that they're making too much profit.
P: Do you believe that an individual can earn too much money?
B: I don't really – it's not – it's not no it's not a view that I have, what do you mean that we should sort of cap someone's income?
P: Umm ...
B: Not really no why what's the point. We could spend ages trying to stop the sort of highest paid earners earning the money and actually in an international market today you'd probably just drive them abroad. What does that matter? The important thing is to level up those people who don't have opportunity in our society.
P: But where is the justice in taxing someone who earns £34,000 a year which is about enough to cover a mortgage on a one-bedroom flat in outer London at the same rate as you tax someone who earns £34 million?
B: Because ... Well the person who earns £34 million is they are paying the top rate of tax on £34 million will pay far more tax than the person on 34,000.
P: I'm asking you about the rate of tax.
B: Yeah I know, but what I'm saying to you is that the rate is less important in this instance than the overall amount of tax that people would pay but you know what would happen, if you go back to the times [cut in transcript] ... you know what would happen [cut in transcript] ...
P: Where's the justice in it?
B: Well ... The justice, you see, when you say to me 'where's the justice in that', the justice for me is concentrated on lifting the incomes of those who don't have a decent income. I don't see, it's not a burning ambition for me to make sure that David Beckham earns less money.
P: But Prime Minister the gap between rich and poor has widened since you while you've been in office.
B: Well actually a lot of those figures incidentally are based on a couple of years ago before many of the measures we took came into effect. But the lowest-income families in this country are benefiting from the government their incomes are rising up. Now the fact that you have

some people at the top end who [P: benefit more] well fine if they're earning more well fine they pay their taxes.

- P: Is it acceptable for the gap between rich and poor to widen?
B: It is acceptable for those people on lower incomes to have their incomes raised. It is unacceptable that they're not given the chances. To me the key thing is not whether the gap between those who, the person who earns the most in the country and the person who owes/earns the least ... whether that gap is different, or not ...
P: So it is acceptable for the gap to widen between rich and poor?
B: It is not acceptable for poor people not to be given the changes they need in life. My task ...
P: That's not my question.
B: I know it's not, it's the way I choose to answer it. Because if you end up going after those people who are the most wealthy in society what you actually end up doing is in fact not even helping those at the bottom end. Now ...
P: So the straight qu ... So in fact the answer to the straight question is it acceptable for the gap between rich and poor to get wider, the answer you're saying is yes.
B: No it's not what I'm saying, what I'm saying is I'm saying that my task is ...
P: Well you're not saying no.
B: But I don't think that is the issue. I think the issue ...
P: You may not think it's the issue, but it is the question, with the greatest of respect.
B: It may be the question ...
P: It is OK for the gap to get wider?
B: It may be the question but it's not the way I choose to answer it. The way I choose to answer it is to say the job of government is to make sure those at the bottom end get the chances they don't have.
P: Prime Minister with respect people see you asked an absolutely straightforward question and they see you not answering it.
B: Yeah because I choose to answer it in the way I am answering it.
P: But you're not answering ...
B: I am answering it. What I'm saying is that the most important thing [P: the question is] is to level up and not level down.
P: The question is, is it acceptable for the gap between rich and poor to get bigger?
B: What I'm saying to you is that in fact whether the very richest person ends up becoming richer, the issue is actually whether the poorest person is given the chance they ... they don't have.

- P: I understand what you're saying but the question is about the gap ...
- B: Yes I know what the question is, I'm choosing to answer it in my way rather than yours.
- P: But you're not answering it.
- B: I am, I'm answering the way that I believe it's the role of government ...
- P: You're answering another question.
- B: Well, answering actually in the way that I want to answer it, and I'll tell you why I want to answer it in this way, because if you end up saying no ... actually my task is to stop the person earning a lot of money, earning a lot of money, you waste all your time and energy taking some money off the people who are very wealthy, in actual fact in today's world they'll probably simply move elsewhere and make their money. And what you're not asking me about but which would be a far more fruitful line of endeavour, is what are you doing for the poorest people in our society to give them a boost.
- P: OK well let's talk a little bit about tax. You have promised ...
- B: Well why don't we talk about the poorest in society and what we're actually doing for them?
- P: Prime Minister I assume you want to be Prime Minister I just want to be an interviewer [B: OK all right] so can we stick to that arrangement? ...

NOTES

- 1 The differentiation between plausible and probable rhetoric occurs throughout the history of recorded rhetorics. The specific words used in this essay have been chosen because they are the keywords used during the Renaissance period, a time when many of our current political structures in the West were being formed. For more detail on the strategies see L. Hunter, *Critiques of Knowing: Situated Textuality in Science, Computing and the Arts* (London, 1999), especially chapters 3 and 4.
- 2 Aristotle elaborates on this in *Topics*; for a discussion see L. Hunter, *Critiques of Knowing*, chapter 1; see also L. Hunter, 'Ideology as the ethos of the nation state', *Rhetorica*, 14 (1996), 197–229.
- 3 N. Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought* (London, 1988), pp. 33–5.
- 4 Cicero, *De oratore* 2.42.178, 43.182, trans E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass, and London, 1942), 1.325, 327.
- 5 H. Gotoff, *Cicero's Caesarian Speeches* (London, 1993), p. xii.
- 6 See in particular the chapter on the 'Art of Politics' in Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought*.
- 7 P. Prill, 'Cicero in theory and practice', *Rhetorica*, 4 (1986), 94–5.
- 8 J. Lewis, 'The framework of political television', in J. Hawthorn (ed.), *Propaganda, Persuasion and Polemic* (London, 1987), pp. 157–71.

- 9 N. Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York, 1992), p. 40.
- 10 For a general discussion of these issues see L. Hunter, 'Civic rhetoric in England 1560–1630', in F. Ames Lewis (ed.), *Sir Thomas Gresham and Gresham College: Studies in the Intellectual History of London in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 88–104.
- 11 P. Collinson, quoted in D. Northbrook, 'Rhetoric, ideology and the Elizabethan world picture', in P. Mack (ed.), *Renaissance Rhetoric* (London, 1994), pp. 140–64 (p. 147).
- 12 See the Gallery Guide to 'Images of Women', Leeds City Art Galleries (1991) and associated commentary by G. Pollock.
- 13 See Hunter, *Critiques of Knowing*, chapter 1.
- 14 J. Mulholland, *The Language of Negotiation* (London, 1991), p. 100.
- 15 BBC interview, April 2001, transcription the author's own.
- 16 Bremner, Bird and Fortune, 'Channel Four, Election Special, May 2001.
- 17 See L. Hunter, 'Difference as equality: stories in/of Nunavut', plenary lecture to the London conference on Canadian Studies (forthcoming in *Canadian Studies*).
- 18 See L. Hunter, 'Listening to situated textuality: working on differentiated public voices', *Feminist Theory*, special issue on 'Gendering Ethics/The Ethics of Gender', ed. L. Hogan and S. Rosenell, 2 (2001), 205–18.
- 19 For one discussion of this see N. Yavval Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London, 1997).