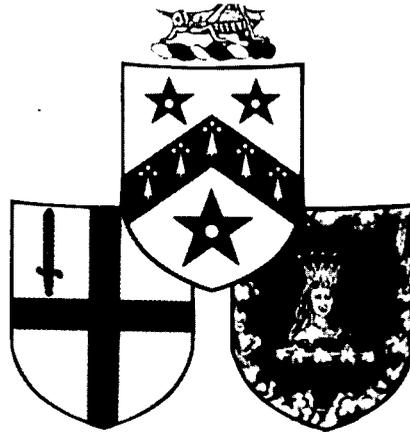


*G R E S H A M*  
*COLLEGE*



**VIDEO CICERO:  
MODERN ORATORS ON  
TELEVISION AND RADIO**

A Lecture by

**PROFESSOR LYNETTE HUNTER MA PhD**  
**Gresham Professor of Rhetoric**

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# VIDEO CICERO

## Professor Lynette Hunter

Over the past two lectures I have been moving to smaller and smaller writing and reading communities, with particular interests and issues of their own. In complete contrast to the way these voices are frequently silenced, and possibly related to it, 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. If First Nations orators 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, what Cicero would have called 'rhetoric'.

What I would like to argue today is 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 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 is set up for a circumscribed democracy, in fact an oligarchy. We should not forget that Greece and Rome were slave states, and Rome especially depended on a slave economy. People communicated orally, so if you were listening to a political speech you could nudge your neighbour, interrupt, make your feelings known by walking out. The key element of oratory at the time, and still nowadays, is the ability of the orator to establish common ground with the audience. They must trust you. [extract from 1997 Party Political Broadcast – the Labour party]

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.

[extract from 1192 Tory Party Conference + Thatcher's the 'lady's not for turning']

But think about Labour in the 1980s: 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, and splintered.

Now, the chair that I hold here at Gresham is that of Rhetoric, and it is apt to be speaking about rhetorical issues. One of the issues that you may well know about, but which it is 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. Aristotle claimed that plausible rhetoric was only appropriate 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. 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 *Orator* developed a rhetoric for a state quite different from Aristotle's. The population of Rome was much greater than that of fourth century Athens, and a substantial part of the population lived in appalling poverty and extremity.<sup>1</sup> 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 300 to 600, 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 *Orator* 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 the first step toward a political rhetoric that speaks for and not to its audience. Harold Gotoff notes of Cicero with 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.<sup>3</sup>

Not that Cicero was the first or only person to do this, by no means. However, his skill, fame and writing became so influential that many people imitated his style and his work became central to an

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<sup>1</sup> N. Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought* (London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 33-35.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *Orator*, II.xli.177-8, trans E. Sutton (London: William Heinemann, 1952), p. 325.

education in rhetoric. Furthermore Cicero was one of the first in western philosophy to separate between the state and the government, and to argue that the function of the state is to preserve the accumulation of private property.<sup>4</sup> Both elements were connected with his attempts to stabilise the diversity of voices newly come to government, and his worries 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/ 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 B.C.). Occurring 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 the prosecution as criminal. It is this, more than anything else, that convinces the court to acquit.

It is important that, lacking any personal common ground, 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 countermoves with which

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<sup>3</sup> H. Gotoff, *Cicero's Caesarian Speeches* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. xii.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular the chapter on the 'Art of Politics' in N. Wood, cited above.

<sup>5</sup> P. Prill, 'Cicero in Theory and Practice' *Rhetorica*, IV:2 (Spring, 1986), pp. 94-5.

<sup>6</sup> J. Lewis, 'The Framework of Political Television', *Propaganda, persuasion and polemic*, ed. J. Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), pp. 157-171.

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 an appalling piece of racist comment.

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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, Machievelli is a consummate example. Much of his advice book, *The Prince*, is concerned with ethos: how the Prince must appear to his subjects in order to maintain his rule. Machievelli 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 current examples of this advice is Bill Clinton, but Clinton's ethos gives evidence of something other than manipulation. The manipulative ethos is short term. It's 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 (where do you geographically place Blair, or Mandelson, or Hague?), Clinton has a specific local base – albeit large – in the southern states of the USA, that he draws on for his ethos. He has been called, by an African American writer, '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 recently, his sexual activities, this local ethos has held firm. At the same time he has, according to Machievelli, chosen his vice well. Throughout his testimony to Senate 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 is to encourage the audience to claim common ground for itself, which it has shown itself keen to do.

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<sup>7</sup> N. Machievelli, *The Prince* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), p. 40.

[clip of Clinton after the Senate vote on impeachment + State of the Union address]

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 century, where many still want to maintain the idea of the 'good' man, to the latter, where there is increasing awareness 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 only behave like a courtly person 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 Poesie* (1585), evades the problem by saying that English courtiers are of course good men, and only foreign ones are manipulative. 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> When Hobbes 30 to 40 years later 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 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. Again it is significant that during this period in England there was great social mobility, exacerbated by Henry'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.<sup>10</sup>

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However, with the gradual extension of the franchise, culminating in full voting rights in 1929 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

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<sup>8</sup> P. Collinson, quoted in D. Norbrook 'Rhetoric, Ideology and the Elizabethan World Picture', *Renaissance Rhetoric*, ed P. Mack (London: Macmillan, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See the Gallery Guide to 'Images of Women', Leeds City Art Galleries, 1991, and associated commentary by Griselda Pollock.

<sup>10</sup> See L. Hunter, *Critiques of Knowing* (London: Routledge, 1999), chapter one.

them any more. Various strategies were developed to cope with this diversity of interest, some being rather crude like 'pork-barrel' politics, which works through 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 post-war period. Thatcher is 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 is 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. William Hague has a similar ethos, which generates similar response.

[clip from Bremner on Hague]

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 a few months ago 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. Tony Blair has the same problem, of coalescing public opinion not around war, but around peace. He can do so in the time-honoured fashion of calling on law and order and protection of property, but also, because he is Labour he has to call on issues of social concern. His response has been cautious in all areas except that of the family and of personal morality, which have become central to his ethos.

[party political broadcast from 1997]

While Blair has been somewhat more successful in calling on the moral majority than was Major, he still has a problem with the issue 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 the problem with difference is largely due to the media in this country, 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 participated in one of those discussion groups on so many

programmes, will know that you are expected to keep what you have to say predigested and to the point. The medium is not there to encourage discussion or thoughtful debate. A clear indication of the rhetorical effects that this has is found in the following statement from a most helpful book by Joan Mulholland, *The Language of Negotiation*:

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.(99)

This stress on the necessity for 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 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 only lead 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, it 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.

What has come to be known as 'grass-roots politics' usually adopts 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

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<sup>11</sup> J. Mulholland, *The Language of Negotiation* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 100.

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 recent furore over 'spin doctors' which reached a peak in the summer of 1998 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.

[clip of Bremner doing Blair on 'do they deserve us?']

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 this century, within the context of First Nations politics in Canada. People agree to be represented, and sometimes they select an advocate, often 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. 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. In England, the media capitalise on the fact of political representation which implies similarity rather than difference, because 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 recent sparring 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 is well-known for his anti-European feelings, refused to do so. Murdoch's ethos is exceptionally powerful, particularly because it is 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:

- 1) 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?
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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.

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 was always 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'<sup>12</sup> will be to the twenty-first century what 'inclusion' was for Cicero, or what 'representation' was for Hobbes. All I am certain of is that the Ciceronian ethos that speaks for us rather than to us still pervades contemporary politics, at a time when we have moved on and need other rhetorical strategies to make difference an active agent in the political world.

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<sup>12</sup> For one discussion of this, see N. Yuval Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

# *GRESHAM COLLEGE*

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