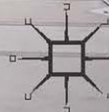


RHETORIC, POLITICS AND SOCIETY  
GENERAL EDITORS: A. Finlayson; J. Martin; K. Phillips

# RHETORIC IN BRITISH POLITICS AND SOCIETY



Edited by  
Judi Atkins, Alan Finlayson,  
James Martin and Nick Turnbull



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# Rhetoric in British Politics and Society

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# Introduction: Rhetoric and the British Way of Politics

*Alan Finlayson and James Martin*

In Ancient Greece, in the 5th century BCE, the people we now call Sophists began to reflect on the power of speech to rouse people to anger and move them to tears. They were the first (in Europe) to try to understand how language works, and to grasp the strangeness of its relationship to the reality it describes yet of which it is also a part. Such concerns had particular importance in the democratic city of Athens. It was a noisy place in which civic life revolved around arenas of public speaking and disputation – from the public political assembly to private (and drunken) philosophical symposia by way of a noisy agora. In these places the ability to speak well – to instruct, to move and to persuade – was a vital skill for citizens of all kinds. As teachers of that skill, the Sophists were offering to train others in something thought to be as important as soldiering or manufacturing, essential for personal self-defence and for the maintenance of the self-government of the polis.

This situation was not uncontroversial. Plato founded philosophy against rhetoric. He thought the latter an inferior form of knowledge, and for that reason politically dangerous. It enabled those with little qualification to speak of important matters as if they possessed genuine understanding. Through Plato the world has learned that rhetoric must be deceptive; that it is nothing other than the use of words that sound pleasing, pandering to the desires and preconceptions of a fickle public. Genuine knowledge, Plato insisted, requires a severe, critical dedication to Truth; a standard to which, he believed, democratic societies (committed to equality and to public decision-making) cannot possibly adhere.

Today, it seems that Plato's view has won out. The name 'sophist' is an insult and political speech is commonly dismissed as 'mere rhetoric' – a superficial play of surfaces that misleads and distracts audiences rather than informs them. However, we suggest (and this book demonstrates) it is time to reconsider that view. If one is trying to understand, explain and assess politics in Britain, dismissal of 'mere' rhetoric is a scholarly, intellectual and political mistake.

Here are three reasons to agree with us:

The first of these is, in its way, in harmony with Plato's anxieties. Questions concerning authority, deceit and manipulation on the part of political actors are some of the most important. However, if we attend only to these we risk blinding ourselves to the contribution of rhetorical knowledge to social and political life. For example, since politics is not only about making decisions but also about implementing them, it requires people to take on the functions of leadership: to organise, instruct and motivate. If there is no one (in the government, civil service or public service) who knows how to speak to others and help them to recognise common goals, then organisation breaks down and government fails. Conversely, challenges to political leadership (to its weakness or mendacity) require the articulation of counter-arguments. If we were to abolish rhetoric we might thereby free ourselves from the burden of hearing some self-serving cant from an Honourable Member, only to realise that the demonstrators in Hyde Park have nobody to express and amplify their message or to direct it at those in power. The solution to bad rhetoric, we suggest, is good rhetoric.

A second reason to take rhetoric seriously is that if we do not attend to the ways political actors shape and express their arguments, then we miss a fundamental dimension of political organisation and practice. The locations, forms and styles of argument that predominate in any particular regime are a fundamental feature of that regime. They are not 'mere' surfaces. How we argue about politics (where it happens, who can do it and what counts as a 'proper' argument) is as much and as basic a feature of a 'constitution' as its distribution of powers. Part of what makes British politics specifically British is the way that argument within it is staged – from the peculiarities of parliamentary debate to the habits of our satirists and our journalists' culture of interrogation.

Finally, although in Britain rhetoric no longer occupies the exalted position it once held in the Renaissance curriculum, it remains a skill that some people, at least, are taught. The debating clubs and societies of certain schools and universities inculcate in their members a variety of skills in public speaking; professional politicians employ consultants and advisers to hone their presentations, as well as speechwriters tasked with making their words powerful and memorable. This situation – the inequitable distribution within British public life of a fundamental political skill – is important not only because it enables some while disabling others. It also gives rise to and sustains a particular 'rhetorical culture', a combination of expectations and assumptions (or 'tastes') in relation to political argument; a culture of disputation shared intensely by those at the centre of government, if also distant from the rhetorical cultures of other constituencies within the country.

With these thoughts in mind, this book sets out to draw a rough map of some of the forms, locations and styles of rhetoric in British politics. It takes us, at one end, to Parliament, where we may observe the rhetorical function

of question and answer, and the styles and conventions of parties and their leaders, and then to the other, where we learn about everyday and informal arguments over race, nation and identity. Which of these is the centre and which is the periphery is a question we leave for readers to answer. In the remainder of this introduction, we explore and explain at a more general level the ways in which we think about and seek to analyse the British way of political rhetoric.

## Talking politics

A charge often levelled at politics is that it is all talk and no action; that, for instance, Parliament is full of little more than hot air, or that politicians' fine words (as the old saying has it) 'butter no parsnips'. As a polemical complaint against ineffective government these are perfectly fine things to say. As political analysis, however, they lack perspicacity. The charge that politics is too often 'words' instead of 'substance' is fundamentally misplaced because political communication *is* a kind of action; it is a way of 'doing' politics and sometimes a way of changing the ways in which politics is done. Indeed, a peculiarity of politics as a domain of social action is that behaviour within it is shaped not only by reality, but also by the ways that people apprehend reality. Consequently, as William Connolly puts it, 'the language of politics is not a neutral mechanism that conveys ideas independently formed; it is a [...] structure of meanings that channels political thought and action in certain directions' (1974, p. 1).

Such political speech-action can take many forms and these can be more or less apt, more or less effective. Debating, announcing, cajoling, ordering, hectoring, attacking, jeering, praising, abusing and defending are all important political actions. Standing committees, cabinet offices, international summits, party conferences, television interviews, upstairs at Number 10 and outside its front door are just a few of the locations in which that speech-action takes place. So, too, are newspaper op-ed columns, street demonstrations and (if myth is to be believed) the saloon bars of pubs up and down the country. Political actors – be they elected or appointed, mainstream or insurgent – produce a vast range of tangible communicative artefacts: manifestos, press releases, legislation, official statements, conference resolutions, party political broadcasts, campaign posters, electoral addresses, pamphlets, reports, blogs, graffiti, chants and cheers.

Communication, then, is an irreducible dimension of political action, not its opposite. The challenge is to understand these actions. That involves, in the first place, identifying and documenting their varying forms and contexts. It also requires analysis and conceptualisation of the different sorts of effects such forms can have (and those which they cannot). Famously, in his *Politics*, Aristotle argued that speech and language (as opposed to the merely expressive voice of animals) was a distinctive human characteristic, and one



that enabled a civil life in a polis. Voice indicates pleasure or pain but speech, he said, made it possible to propose a sense of advantage or harm, their justice or injustice, to courses of action – and ‘the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state’ (Aristotle, 1988, 1253).

The contemporary political philosopher, Jacques Rancière (1999), has modified this claim by asking after the ways that a political regime recognises (and enables) some forms of communication just as it refuses to hear others – the ‘voices’ of those who cannot speak (or are not allowed to speak) in officially expected ways. Rancière’s point is not that speech and communication are not a part of politics, but that political life involves an ongoing dispute about who can speak to and about the polis, what they can and cannot speak about, and the ways in which they must or must not do so. That, in our view, requires us to analyse and theorise the forms and modes of speaking and arguing characteristic of different parts of a state such as Britain.

Those who accept that politics is never ‘merely’ talk might, however, advance a second common charge: that politics entails speech-action that is mendacious, manipulative and misleading. It is undeniable that party and electoral politics today is deeply coloured by the dark arts of ‘communications consultants’ who, for a fee, will train a politician to deflect journalists’ hard questions, use polls and focus groups to determine what policies will be best-sellers, and advise on how to make what seems superficial (the pitch of your voice, the colour of your tie, the way you look at your children) into the only substance that counts. For example, in 2009, advising Republicans on how to oppose Democratic Party proposals for healthcare reform, American political consultant Frank Luntz offered a list of ‘words that work’. These came from ‘polling results and Instant Response dial sessions’, and their presumed power lay in the fact that they captured ‘not just what Americans want to see but exactly what they want to hear’ (2009, p. 3).

It is hard to read this and not think of Plato’s despair at a polity deformed by those who would teach others how to pander to the people, telling them not what they needed to know but what they wanted to hear. With this in mind Simone Chambers has claimed that mass democracy has become pathological: campaign techniques such as those derived from psychological research into ‘trigger’ words and powerful ‘framing’ devices have, she argues, reduced political communication to ‘speech that is concerned first and foremost with gaining support for a proposition and only secondarily with the merits of the arguments or persuasion for that matter’ (2009, p. 337). What she calls ‘plebiscitary rhetoric’ does not treat people as citizens able to reflect, deliberate and decide for themselves, but only as a ‘means to power’.

We agree with the general claim that certain sorts of communications consultant are a force in contemporary politics, and that they are part of an identifiable and problematic shift in the form and content of political discourse. However, we do not wholly agree with Chambers. For, despite

a lot of effort and although it caused a lot of disruption, the sorts of strategies outlined by Luntz did not work. Amended it may have been, but the Affordable Care Act passed into law. Furthermore, the world described by Chambers – of duped publics passively absorbing the diatribes of powerful orators – does not seem to us to be the one in which most of us live. On the contrary, politicians find it hard to get an audience to listen to them. Trust in politicians is at historically low levels. We expect them to lie. That is to say, the problem with political communication in the present day may not be that political actors are skilled in lying to a supine public; indeed, they are quite lacking in such skill. What we, as political analysts, need to do is not simply reject the contemporary organisation of political communication but, rather, understand it, in its complexities and disappointments. We need to make sense of it not as a deformation of politics so much as a way in which it is now done. This is not to avoid normative questions. Rather, the purpose of such analysis is to enable us to ask questions about who benefits from a regime based on the systematic failure of political communication.

We propose to conceive of a polity as a way of organising speech; an arrangement of places within which political speech is formed and articulated and through which it is disseminated (yet also within which it may be confined). These places may be literal, institutional and official in form (such as council chambers), but they may also be informal or virtual, developing out of a confluence of technology, professional routine and seeming popularity (such as the op-ed column or television talk show). These may in turn give rise to ‘genres’ of political argument and communication – tacit rules governing what is and is not sayable and how it may or may not be said.

So far we have claimed only that it is worth reflecting deeply on the organisation and disorganisation of political communication. We have yet to specify what is beneficial about conceiving of political speech-action in the distinct ways offered by the tradition of rhetorical theory, analysis and practice.

There are a variety of ways in which one might understand the activity of persuasion. The business and self-improvement sections in bookshops (particularly, it seems, at airports and railway stations where people ‘on the move’ take instruction on how to move others) often promise tricks that will enable you magically to sell your product or inspire others to follow you. Researchers in Psychology (and, increasingly, Neurology) similarly claim to have discovered the more-or-less secret techniques of persuasion. Robert Cialdini for instance, has established just ‘six principles of influence’ which he identifies as reciprocity, consistency, social proof, authority, liking and scarcity (2007). The rhetorical approach – which can appear similar – is in fact completely different from this, in both its origins and its intentions.

Aristotle argued that the art of rhetoric was concerned with the capacity to identify the available means of persuasion in particular situations

(1991, 1355). Two aspects of this definition are of particular interest here. The first is the stress on specific and particular situations. Psychological, neurological and similar approaches tend to conceive of persuasion as something one individual does to another, a means rooted in generic features of human thought and behaviour. In contrast, the rhetorical tradition thinks in terms of ‘rhetorical situations’ (see Bitzer, 1968; Martin, 2013). These are moments where something precipitates out of the confluence of varied elements of society, history and culture, crystallising into a particular relationship between an issue or problem and an audience that might make a decision about it. That situation is partially open (exactly how the issue might be understood and what decision made is not determined), but it is also constrained. Not just anyone can advance any argument with any expectation of success.

Within that situation the art of rhetoric may be exercised. It involves the identification of such rhetorical situations, and a capacity to understand them so as to locate within them the opportunities for action. Aristotle does not refer to a single mechanism of persuasion, but to the ‘available means’; the multiple potentialities that might be exploited but which will each introduce into the situation their own logics with distinct effects. The rhetorician must make a judgement and construct from what is present in the situation the means to act within it. Indeed, where manuals of persuasion tend to bring to persuasive encounters a series of more or less fixed rules to be applied, rhetoric works in the opposite way. There certainly are rules of thumb to be found in the rhetorical manuals produced across the centuries. But they are not fixed techniques. From the point of view of political actors, they are only ways to reflect on the possibilities within a situation and to identify potential means by which one might adapt to it.

Rhetorical activity is always within a particular context and never apart from it. To be good at it one has to understand the social, institutional and historical context, and the specificities of domain, issue and audience. That is why, for instance, in *De Oratore* Cicero argued that the rhetorician able to identify a means of producing belief in others needed to ‘master everything that is relevant to the practices of citizens and the ways humans behave: all that is connected with normal life, the functioning of the State, our social order, as well as the way people usually think, human nature and character’ (2001, 2.68). But if the art of political talk requires appreciation of context, what is it that rhetorical knowledge itself brings to light?

## The appeal(s) of rhetoric

The essence of rhetoric lies in ‘the appeals’ – that is, the proofs of argument. These are the means of persuasion and Aristotle was specifically concerned with those forms created by the rhetorician (as opposed to the forms of already given evidence). He identified three fundamental forms of appeal

distinguished by the 'location' of the proof – in the speaker, in the audience or in the subject itself.

The first of these is the appeal rooted in 'ethos', or character. This is the proof in play when a lawyer seeks to show the innocence of a client by describing their overall good character. In politics it often concerns the attempt to demonstrate personal character of a sort that might win support for some claim or proposition. That may include honesty and decency, but it might also involve resolution, intelligence or kindness. It can also, and importantly, involve the demonstration that a political figure understands and appreciates the life and experience of those to whom they are speaking, the extent to which they in fact share such experience. The rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke, stressed the centrality to rhetoric of 'identification', by which he meant the establishment of some form of equivalence between speaker and audience (see Burke, 1969). Of course, the kind of character appropriate to situations will vary depending on the audiences and the problems being addressed.

The second appeal is to 'pathos' – the emotions and feelings within an audience. Here a rhetorician seeks to engender in people the affective state most likely to inspire them to agree with the propositions advanced. Here, too, things are variable. The appropriate and possible emotions vary depending on the audience and the situation. The rhetorician does not have an unlimited power to sway us, but only a potential to identify and amplify connections between mood and the matters of the moment.

It is easy to see how each of these appeals may be merely manipulative. But before leaping to condemnation one might pause to reflect on the centrality of character to politics. When selecting someone for a position one must judge not only the policies they propose, but also the likelihood that they will successfully implement them and be ready to address unforeseen crises. Similarly, emotion, too, has its reasons. Numerous theorists from neuroscience to ethics have shown the vital connections between feeling and knowing. Furthermore, if there is manipulation going on in appeals to ethos or pathos, it is not always clear who is manipulating whom. Appeals to character and emotion work only to the extent that they are rooted in judgements or outlooks *already possessed* by the audience. For example, one demonstrates resolution only to an audience that already prizes this as a virtue. In heated political dispute rival rhetoricians are, in a sense, bringing forward and demonstrating different aspects of the values and culture of a community, indicating their re-application to a problem in the present.

This aspect of rhetoric is even clearer in the case of the third form of proof: the appeal to 'logos' or reason. In Aristotelian rhetoric, this is a form of quasi-logical appeal rooted in the pre-existing opinions of the public being addressed. The simplest way to think of this is in the terms of classical logic. There, deductions consist of three statements: a major premise (such as 'all men are mortal'); a minor premise ('Socrates is a man'); and