Crisis of Rhetoric Launch Event: Committee Room G, House of Lords, 15th October 2019

Event Transcript

Speaker names and abbreviations: Dr Henriette van der Blom (HvdB), Prof. Alan Finlayson (AF), Phil Collins (PC), Prof. Mary Beard (MB), John Vice (JV).
[??? Indicates indecipherable speech on the recording].

HvdB: Welcome, everybody, we should probably get started. Thank you so much to all of you for coming through all the security, all the barricades at Parliament, we are very pleased to see you here. My name is Henriette van der Blom, I'm a Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Birmingham and I am the principal investigator of the *Crisis of Rhetoric* research project sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, together with my colleague Professor Alan Finlayson, Professor of Politics at the University of East Anglia. We've been conducting this project for a couple of years now and this is the finale that you've been invited to come and share in, where we are launching the findings that you have all received on your seat. I should also say that this booklet is available in PDF on the project website, which you will see on the inside cover, page 3 – one of the text boxes. So, if you want it in PDF, you can go and download it for free, share it with friends, colleagues as you wish.

Now we are very pleased to be here because the whole idea of this project was to find out what's going on with political speech today and to join up two groups who perhaps don't speak often enough with each other; that is, our own world of academia with practitioners: speakers, orators, speech writers and everybody who help the speakers prepare and deliver the speeches in as effectful and thoughtful manners as possible. That's the whole point and that's why we're so pleased to be here in the Houses of Parliament, hosted by John Vice (the Editor of Lords Hansard) and Gráinne McGinley has helped very much during the day to escort us around because of all this security, so we're very pleased to have been allowed here with you.

So the project is really to get together academics who think they know about rhetoric or oratorical culture and politics and to hear from practitioners what their experience really is, and then hopefully giving something back to them: what we think is important in politics. We've had six workshops, the first and the final one to really get together practitioners and academics to share experience and knowledge about political speech today, and then we have had the four middle workshops: mainly with academics but we were very pleased that a few practitioners and speech writers turned up as well to discuss specific themes; and what you have in the booklet – in the findings – is a distillation, you could say, of those discussions, of those findings and our own thoughts building on that. And I know a lot of people in this room have already engaged with the project, I recognise many people, and we're very glad that you're back to see what has happened, but we're also very pleased to welcome those of you that haven't been involved so far because it means we can reach out to a wider audience and hopefully hear what you want to tell us afterwards.

So the running order of today is: after my introduction I will hand over to Alan Finlayson, who will introduce the findings in a little bit more detail, and then we'll hand over to Phil Collins and Mary Beard to respond to the findings and talk about what they think is going on with political oratory today. After that, we hopefully have an hour for Q and A where you can ask questions of any of us and we can discuss what you think is actually happening today, and we hope – if there's time, it depends on how many questions you have – to have a little bit of time where we can all talk with each other in a more informal way. But that of course depends on how much you want to engage with us in the formal question session.

(**HvdB** provides directions for facilities; **JV** adds fire safety regulations)

HvdB: So Alan will introduce the findings, but I just want to say that this is a real pleasure to be sharing this with you, because we found that we learnt so much from talking with people,

who have been thinking about it as long as we have, who are engaging in it, and we really want this to be an open and constructive discussion. Thank you and welcome again.

[Audience Applause]

AF: Thank you, Henriette, for introducing the evening's proceedings. So, I should start by clarifying that, although I write about rhetoric and study it and am in that sense a rhetorician, I am not a great rhetorician and orator; I am an academic and political theorist and one of the reasons I'm so interested is because it's such a powerful and impressive speech of a sort that one doesn't often get to give in the lecture theatre even if one could. But I'm trying to avoid being too academic, I probably will lay out my main arguments and there is further reading recommended in the booklet, but I won't take you through, line by line, a text that you've all got in your hand and can read perfectly well for yourself. And what I do is talk more broadly about how I came to the project and the general way in which we feel we've tried to encapsulate the arguments, issues, and experiences that came up across the project.

So, I've always been a reader of political speeches. Since I became an academic as someone researching British politics, and political ideas and ideology, speeches were a major source for me trying to understand how people were thinking about politics and the issues that they faced at particular times. And it took me a long while – and it seems stupid – it took me a long while to realise that those speeches weren't just a source of ideas for academic researchers like me, but actually that was their main purpose – to communicate ideas to everybody in political life. They were really about trying to explain ideas so that citizens, voters, the electorate could understand what the arguments were for and against certain kinds of policies. Now, it took me a while to understand that because, of course, I was used to seminar papers and academic arguments and of course political speeches are not and cannot be the same as academic arguments: they have to be suited to the fraught, conflictual, uncertain conditions that our

political life is always subject to. And crucially they have to be about motivating people in some way. They're not just about explaining things as I try to do in a classroom; they are about engaging people so that they might do something at their end, whether that's just give a vote or walk through a division lobby or commit themselves to some larger cause or help implement some kind of policy change.

In that sense, without rhetoric, without communication of ideas in ways that are proving, pleasing, and persuading, as Cicero put it; without that, politics can't really function. Administration can happen, people can be told to do things but we're missing something vital about political culture and political life. But also studying speeches, I began to see some of the ways in which political speech has changed over time, in some ways for the good: it isn't all grand and imitating classical models in ways that don't appeal to people in the present day but there are also some changes in the way in which rhetoric happens in British politics that we might need to pause over and think a little bit about. I could give lots of examples but I'm going to draw on work by political science colleagues at the University of Southampton who had a brilliant idea, which was just to investigate what do people think makes a good politician and how do they come to that conclusion. And they came up with … they wanted to ask people in the present day what they thought about that, but also use historical record, the mass observation surveys, to see how that had changed over time. And part of what they found was a big change in the way in which people come to understand what political figures are saying – what they think, what they believe and what they want to do. They found, perhaps surprisingly, that in the 1945 election, nearly half the population either went to see a politician give a full speech or listened to a full speech, 30-40 minutes, on the radio. And engaged with that speech intellectually as well as politically, thought about what was being said, judged whether they liked the person, believed them, thought they knew what they were doing, often recording that they thought it was an impressive speech and agreed whether this was a politician

who was good in the sense that they knew what they were doing. And when they compared that with the 2005 election of course, perhaps unsurprisingly, they found that hardly anybody ever heard anybody give a full-length political speech. They heard snippets, extracts from the news and they complained about not hearing arguments fully developed, about not knowing what people think, but crucially they found that people shifted from judging a good politician in terms of whether they sounded convincing or knew what they were talking about, to simply whether or not they were normal – were they like us or not? And there's a big shift there with lots of reasons for that, all kinds of changes in culture and politics, but I think part of that actually is a rhetorical shift, it's rhetoric reflecting that change but also pushing that change; politics has become very personalised and, in some respects, that's fine; as we explain in the book, one of the classical appeals is to ethos, is to character. The person matters in political arguments of all kinds.

But a definite trend in political speech is a shift away from other forms of argument to emphasising presentations of the character of politicians, trying to prove that they are normal, trying to prove that they are like us and that can slip in to a kind of branding and a kind of marketing and that may be an essential part of politics. Now, I'm not going to come to Parliament and say: 'don't do that.' But there is a cost, if we lose out the emphasis of other kinds of ways of arguing – to reason, to the emotions in certain kinds of ways – if we lose a sense of the broader ways in which we can present political cases to people.

And if we do lose that broader kind of appeal, what happens is harm to what we call in the booklet – and this came up in our discussions – to what we call rhetorical citizenship, and that's an idea – we've stolen that idea from some Scandinavian colleagues who study rhetoric and came and talked to us but it's a very interesting way of thinking about rhetoric, political speech and argument. We're perhaps used to thinking about citizenship rights of different kinds: our civil rights to be protected and treated fairly by court; our political rights to vote and participate;

our social rights to certain protections and benefits. But what if we thought about rhetorical rights? The rights of citizens to speak and argue and articulate for themselves but also to see, hear and reflect on what their politicians or other kinds of political activists are saying and doing. And our sense was that part of what's happened is that in a way those rhetorical rights have been abridged. The opportunities for people to sit, hear, listen, think through and to respond, to be critical have been abridged in various ways by the change in rhetorical culture of the country. That's the loss of time that might take, the loss of the places where that might happen but also, in some ways, the loss of the art of rhetoric. Now that rhetorical art – I know the speechwriters in the room know this perfectly well – is not just an art about pleasing phrases or clever put-downs, though some people often think that that is all that rhetoric is. It is, I would say, and we explain this in the booklet, in essence trying to connect claims you want to make about what has to be done, or what shouldn't be done, to the values, to the knowledge [and] understanding of the audience that you're talking to. It's trying to have a conversation with people to try and apply the shared ideas, values and things we have to the situations in which we find ourselves. That's one of the ways in which a community, a town, a city, a company, a nation reflects on who it thinks it is, what resources it thinks it has, where it's been, where it's going, what it wants to become. And that can motivate citizens to be engaged, to think beyond just the offer of policy but to think more broadly about the political issues in a grander way as well as in a detailed way, that are at stake. Now, if that art has in some way been abridged – for all kinds of reasons, the pressures of time, the complexity of issues, the lack of spaces for certain kinds of political disputation – if it has been abridged, the solution to that is going to be speechwriters. I'm particularly proud of the image on our last page, the writer… the workers by pencil [audience laughter] because we became – I certainly became and my colleagues did too, I think – particularly interested by but also sympathetic with speechwriters. Speechwriters I think do an incredible job and our criticisms of rhetoric are not criticisms of speechwriters. I

think that people don't always appreciate citizens but also speechmakers don't always appreciate the complexity of the speechwriter's job as they try to bridge a literary art with an understanding of the political issues, act under pressure to produce things that can then be understood by more general audiences. We met lots of fascinating and interesting speechwriters and heard the stories they had to tell about how they'd tried to address certain situations, how the ways in which their speeches, sometimes very sadly, got taken apart at the last minute or amended in ways that broke what they were trying to achieve and I think that sometimes – I don't want to be critical too much – but I think sometimes we don't appreciate how important a political speech occasion is. It may be mundane from the point of view of high politics but for many people being in a room hearing their MP or a minister speak is the only time that year, maybe in five years, they will be in a room with a politician communicating to them. If they don't feel they're being spoken to, if they don't feel that time has gone into that address, it's going to give them a bad impression about politics and about politicians.

So, the overall argument of the booklet then is simply: yay rhetoric. Rhetoric is good and we have to think about it well and we have to think about it hard. We shouldn't dismiss it because it isn't, as I'm sure everyone in this room knows, just empty talk and empty gestures. It is one of the main ways in which politics and people meet. Done well and artfully, it can be powerful and moving and allow communities to engage with issues and think about how they want to address them. So, without getting into current politics too closely, there is clearly an argument on some people's part that currently political speech is marked by disrespect on all kinds of different sides. So, I think what our booklet ultimately tries to argue is for respect. For respect for speechwriters, and for speechmakers and respect for the importance of arguments. Not just the presentation of positions and the assertion of positions but the giving of the reasons behind those positions so that audiences can think, reflect and make their own choices. And ultimately therefore, respect for people, for citizens, who can, given the opportunity, sit back, think, and

reflect, for themselves. So, ultimately, then, what we're trying to argue for is a resurgence of citizens' rhetorical rights and we're saying that that is something that could perhaps be addressed through the careful reflection and thought of academics, of politicians and of speechwriters and on that nice tricolon I shall finish. Thank you.

[audience applause]

HvdB: Thank you very much, Alan. I'll now hand over to Philip Collins who is a columnist at *The Times* newspaper, used to also be a speechwriter for Tony Blair. He's also an author of several books on rhetoric and famous speeches so he has been circling all around political oratory and rhetoric in all sorts of roles, and we're very pleased to have you here today, Phil.

PC: Well, very glad to be here. Thank you, Henriette, and thank you, Alan. Thank you for the project, thank you in particular for that page that you pulled out – I very much endorse the message celebrating and supporting speechwriters. This is the sort of project I'm delighted to speak at. And I appreciated too your account of the limitations that are attendant upon speechwriters in modern politics; they're very important and I want to talk about them. I want to talk a little bit, too, about the connection between rhetoric and democracy, which I think exists at a very deep level. There is no need for persuasive rhetoric in any system of government other than a democracy. There is rhetoric but it has a different purpose. Its purpose then is merely to inform one of a decision taken elsewhere or to command the public to do something but it's only in a democracy, in the rule by argument, that rhetoric in the sense that we're talking about it becomes very important. So, the two disciplines are connected at the deepest level and they're connected in time and they're connected philosophically as well. So, it's of immense importance, and I think, too, that studies of this kind are crucial because my own view is that rhetoric should be returned in some form to the curriculum. Perhaps not like the *studia humanitatis*: there's a great essay in Quentin Skinner's new book on Hobbes and Shakespeare

and the curriculum that they would have followed, which was an essentially rhetorical curriculum, and how important that was in framing the arguments that you find, for example, in the *Merchant of Venice* and the judicial scene there. And that curriculum, if you go back to it, is actually a remarkable training in the capacity both to reason and also to recognise faulty reasoning, both of which are skills I think are always important but perhaps particularly so now. Because I want to talk a little bit about rhetoric today and I don't want to be Pollyanna about it, I often find myself defending political rhetoric and defending speechwriters and I am happy to do that, but I want to point out some things where I think we are going awry and offer some suggestions as to why that might be. Let me just give you three examples where I think rhetoric today has got problems:

Firstly, the question that Alan mentioned of character – ethos in Aristotle's term – the character of the speaker is a critical component of politics and that disappears when politicians are tempted into boiler plate, standard language, cliché, pre-digested words, prefabricated phrases to use Orwell's famous term. And there's too much of that. Politics is too choreographed and too disciplined, and that sounds like a strange criticism at a time when politics in one sense is rambunctious and ill-disciplined and all over the place, but the spokespeople in the parties have learnt the lessons of the media age to be incredibly tight and boring. There are some politicians who don't need much invitation to be boring, but the media give them that invitation because any interesting phrase is picked apart as evidence of separation and division from another member of their party, and so the temptation to be dull is one which it is always easy to take. But it's very important that we stop this. The dreary nature of a lot of political discourse is a genuine problem. It's not something that happened if you go back into previous eras – it just wasn't the same. That's partly the ubiquity of politics: the ubiquity of modern media mean that there's far too much of it. It used to be the case: Gladstone was doing the Midlothian campaign, he'd speak four times a year at great length, he'd learn the speeches by heart, and they'd be

very highly considered. Politicians today, junior ministers, are speaking three times a week. They're at the […] association manufacturers and they're doing a speech and there's the tyranny of the diary [which] means there's far too much rhetoric and most of it's very, very dull. So, there's things we can do about that.

The second general deficiency I notice, I think, is the – and this is about the conduct of politics and it shows the connection between the way we speak and the way we conduct politics – is that the lack of respect for opponents has become really noticeable. The most obvious example is [US] President Trump and in particular the campaign he ran to be president in which his rhetorical treatment of Hillary Clinton was egregious and outrageous. For any presidential candidate to suggest that their opponent ought to be in prison is really an astonishing breaking of the usual forbearance and the usual protocols of conducting yourself. And though I'm not pious about rhetoric – there's lots of examples historically of extremely raucous rhetoric – that *ad hominem* and false attack – not inconsiderable, probably that it was untrue – was beyond the realms of usual argument and that is something we need to be very careful of.

The third general point, and again I'll use President Trump as an example, is that the norms of politics have to be respected. And the moment I knew that Trump would not respect the usual guardrails of democracy was during the campaign and he went to Gettysburg to do a speech. And every American president since [US President] Lincoln has gone to Gettysburg to do a speech and they all do a cover version of the Gettysburg Address. Two hundred and seventy-two words long, two minutes and forty-five seconds and they all do their own version of it. And it's rather lovely in a way; in a secular republic it's as close as you get to a kind of religious rite and they all do the same speech essentially which is a paean of praise to American liberty and freedom and the constitution. And the way I've sound…I've made it sound a bit pious, but it isn't; it's actually a really important rite of… they're paying homage to the constitution and to politics itself. And remember too that this is a battlefield, it's a civil war battlefield so you're

standing literally in a graveyard and candidate Trump went there in 2016, and instead of the two minutes forty-five of sub-Lincoln rhetoric, he gave them forty-five minutes of vicious tirade about the American constitution being rigged and American politics being absolutely a conspiracy in favour of the elite against the people and it was a horrible, appalling speech to do anywhere but to do it there was evidence that here was someone who is not going to obey the usual norms and practices of American politics. And that struck me as a very important moment, and it turned out to be prophetic.

Now why might this have happened? I just want to say a few words about why…where things have gone wrong. Why is it more difficult today to do really good political speech? Because I think it is. I mean one common perennial deficiency of course is the sheer poverty of the writers who are doing it. We're all only as good as we can be and sometimes people aren't very good, but that's just always been the case and I don't actually believe the people charged with writing are considerably worse than their predecessors before. So, there are many times [where] it's human error which is the cause, but I don't think that's a deep cause.

I think the more interesting cause is that it is more difficult to write interestingly in an era in which politics has become very complex, in which lots of the massive injustices have been redeemed if not entirely solved. So, if you think you go back to 1964 and Martin Luther King [Jr.] is doing a speech of that kind "I have a dream", I don't think it's by any means the end of racism in America today but the same speech can't be given. Not quite the same speech. If you look at Disraeli in 1872 talking about sanitation and noxious diseases and epidemics, again, I don't… I'm not Pollyanna about the state of Britain in 2019 but you couldn't do that speech. There's another component which I think leads to my third point, which is if the speaker has executive authority over what then follows, that speech is rhetorically more effective. So, Disraeli at the Free Trade Hall in 1872 talking about public health – he's the Prime Minister. And the problems in question are those in which strong public action, i.e. the building of [a]

sewage system, really can help. It can solve it. If you do a speech on public health today, and indeed I've written that speech, you're talking about millions of private actions of individuals with their chronic diseases. You would be absurd as if there's… even as the Prime Minister you suggested that you were simply going to fix it through the use of public resources because you can't. It's more complicated than that. So, the absence of executive authority puts a limitation on what you can claim and the effect of the speech.

I think this… the arena in which this is most stark, because it's the most important question and yet the most difficult to render effectively in speech: is the environment, it's climate change. It struck me when I was doing a sort of anthology of great speeches that I was struggling to find a truly great speech on that topic. I thought "well, why? This is a topic of immense importance with a potentially apocalyptic ending that's exactly the kind of material you'd expect to be fruitful for very fine rhetoric".

And I came to the conclusion that, and I think Greta Thunberg demonstrated this, sadly not to good effect at the United Nations, with her rhetoric which made everybody think: "Oh my God", you know, "despair has set in an absolute counsel of apocalypse and despair". And although that works up to a point, it doesn't leave you thinking: "well where are we going to go?" It leaves you wondering: "well, is there a solution?" And it's difficult too because, in that subject more than any other, nobody has the capacity to simply turn it around. Nobody has executive authority. No single government does, no single person does. It's intrinsically an interdependent question, which is just a fact about it, and this is not the case for not doing anything, it's merely the narrower case that arguing about that is harder. Not impossible, but it does make it a different task. And I don't think anybody quite has cracked that one yet. And it's an interesting question.

I want to end with three thoughts on contemporary British political language because I just want to leave you with the recognition that this project and this subject matters enormously in the way we frame arguments.

The first one, I was noticing today – in fact it reminded me that Martin Amis once said about Philip Larkin that he'd lived a really miserable life so that you don't have to – I have done that for you with the SNP conference, [audience laughter] I watched it this morning so that you don't have to – and what I noticed was that speaker after speaker described the Boris Johnson government as "hard right" or "far right". That's an interesting designation and an inaccurate one. If Boris Johnson is hard right and far right, well, there's no space left for people that really are. He's not hard right or far right unless we're stretching the cate[gories]…we'd have to invent a new category then for real fascists. But he's not. And actually, it's bad use of language because it's inaccurate. It's also a very foolish use of language because it's so easy to elude. It's so easy to avoid that category. If you pin on your opponent a description that they would not happily have said of themselves or at least recognise as in the same region as where they inhabit, then they're going to find it very, very easy to elude that definition. So, the minute that a Boris Johnson government increases the minimum wage your characterisation of them as hard right or far right is going to look really stupid. So, it doesn't work. So, it's really poor use of language.

My second example is high-speed rail. Now, high-speed rail [HS2] frames the argument as: "how quickly can you get to Birmingham?" Can you get to Birmingham twenty minutes faster than we can already? Does that matter? Is that an important thing? Should we rip up the Chilterns so we can get to Birmingham twenty minutes sooner? No, that's ridiculous. How much does it cost again? It's a fortune. What a ridiculous thing to do.

High-speed rail has got nothing to do with the speed of going to Birmingham. High-speed rail is about capacity. At the moment, if you've got one track and you're running a very fast train up that track, you cannot have slow trains on that track, obviously, for the duration of that journey because the fast train has to go past them. Therefore, all your slow trains can't run until the fast train has run. If you have two tracks, the fast train can go very fast and you can have loads of slow trains on the slow tracks. Loads of them. The capacity of your rail system is enormously enhanced by the fact of having a single-track fast lane. It's about capacity. So, if this were not high-speed rail but a massive growth of the railways, then it's good and everyone's in favour of it. And it's a rhetorical failing of the people in charge of it not to have seen that. Not to have seen that they were setting themselves up for an argument that they're not going to win, and which sounds unimportant. Whereas in fact, they're there with a policy which is, as I re-described it, really very important. There's still a case against it but at least you're in the right place.

My final example, and one that drives me mad every day, and I'm not… this is the first I've got through ten minutes without talking about Brexit ever, I think [audience laughter]. And I'm not… I'm going to now break that self-denying ordinance. Because as someone who was on the Remain side of that argument but has been absolutely exasperated by the residual Remain campaign that's followed since the [EU] referendum in 2016, the thing that has most intrigued me is linguistic. The rhetoric of that campaign. Brexit is not a cliff edge. I hear over and over and over again: "the cliff edge of no deal", "the cliff edge of Brexit." When you fall of a cliff, as I'm sure you know, that is a very rapid descent leading to a catastrophic and probably fatal collision at the bottom. But, as Sir Ivan Rogers said brilliantly: "Brexit is a process not an event." But all the rhetoric suggests that it is an event and not a process. And Brexit will not be a cliff edge, we will not fall rapidly to a massive collision at the bottom. We will fall slowly and at times imperceptibly over quite a long period to a point where we're at a considerably

lower vantage point than when we started. It's a long bloody slide. It's not a cliff edge. And the reason that matters is that you say "cliff edge" early on and then three months later, we haven't collapsed at the bottom in a heap. All the other sides say: "look we told you this would be fine", and then you say: "well, the cliff edge is coming". And the cliff edge doesn't come again. The cliff edge will never come because it's not a cliff edge. So, the metaphor really matters. The metaphor has structured the argument and it's structured the argument in a way that's been hospitable to the other side. Whereas if that argument had been different all the way through, then the argument would be different as well.

So, these things really, really matter. The words we choose count a lot. They structure arguments enormously. I'm delighted this project is going on and I'm very happy to contribute and before I go off a cliff edge I'll end and hand over to Mary.

[audience applause]

HvdB: Thank you very much, Phil, for that both entertaining but also thought-provoking Spiel on rhetoric and oratory today. Our second respondent is Professor Mary Beard, who's Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge, but I think to many in this room perhaps even more known for her many and insightful appearances on radio, on the internet, with her blog and, of course, on television as well. Over to you, Mary.

MB: Thanks very much and I just want to start by saying congratulations to the people who've actually got this project finished. You must be pleased; we're pleased to be here.

And all I can do, because I'm not an expert really either in ancient rhetoric and certainly not in modern political rhetoric, I want to give a few observations from a more general classical perspective and also from a soft feminist perspective on this. And I'm trying to engage with the report, sometimes I hope constructively, but not always going exactly down the same line. And I want to start in the year AD 54 – I warned you that we'd be talking about the ancient

world – and I want to start with the historian Tacitus' account of the first days of the reign of the slightly tiresome emperor Nero, right? Then a teenager. Tiresome, as you know, is a euphemism and it was hard at the beginning to get Nero to do the job, and the first thing he had to perform in his own reign was to give the funeral address of uncle Claudius who had recently died, allegedly by poisoned mushrooms. And this funeral address for Claudius was written for him by his tutor, the philosopher Seneca. Tacitus was a frightful old curmudgeon as well as being a rather acute analyst of imperial power and he mumbled terribly about this occasion, this was the sign that things were going to go bad. Why? Because in this speech that Nero gave, written for him by Seneca, this was, Tacitus said, the first time an Emperor had spoken with borrowed words, i.e. he hadn't made/done his own speech. Now I mention that for two reasons: first of all, it cannot possibly be true that that was the first time the Emperor had not written his own speech. People had been writing, particularly law court but not only law court, speeches for other people since at least the fifth century BC, Athenian democracy, and I'm absolutely certain that Augustus didn't write all his own words. I pick on it, though, in first because it's a good example – Tacitus is a good example – of the kind of nostalgia that your report sometimes alludes to in the way we look back to a golden age of oratory.

Now I don't know the 19th century half as well as you do, Alan, but I've always been extremely doubtful that the majority – well I know this not to be the case – the majority of 19th century Brits engaged constructively in political debate while listening wrapped in speeches that went on for hours, right? I tell you for a fact they didn't. That view that we have of this golden age of political debate is deeply nostalgic and it's wrong for every single reason you could imagine. You know, the Peterloo Massacre is quite a good reason for thinking it's wrong and also all those people who were bored witless by Gladstone droning on and all the people who were not allowed into the room like… people like me, while Gladstone did drone on. So, I think the idea that somehow it was all better in the past, you know, you read it in newspaper accounts –

Victorian newspapers are really good at this – and they'll put some really dreary paragraph and then there'll be brackets "muffled laughter" [audience laughter] and you'll think: "a likely story". But also, as well as, I think, Tacitus' faux nostalgia there it also raises the question for me of the ownership of political or any sort of rhetoric actually and the very contested boundary there is in political speaking, as Cicero in the first century BC saw all too well, between an orator and an actor. Now I'm very pleased that you've involved loads of speechwriters in this, because they far too often get left out of these kinds of discussions and I think they far too often get their hard work – I'm sure you must have many scars of this – utterly mangled by the person who speaks their words.

PC: Always. [Audience laughter]

MB: The best… the best example or the worst example of that is when I, for various reasons, was doing a bit of a careful study of Thatcher's "the lady's not for turning" speech, and I'm sure the professionals here will know all too well that what's absolutely clear when you look at that speech that Ronald Miller had put in this very great joke on Goldsmith: "the lady's not for burning" versus "the lady's not for turning" and the person who was giving the speech didn't see the joke at all. Absolutely fascinating.

But, though I don't want to go against the flavour of the month and be sort of anxious about speechwriting, I would be a bit insincere if I didn't say that I sometimes feel uneasy by the obvious gap in political rhetoric between the writer and the speaker and what that says about authority and political authority. Now I thought it was a very interesting point about, you know, the idea that the person speaking could actually do something; that seems important. But there is also the point: is that person speaking to me? Well actually, I feel, no they're not speaking to me they're reading out, either well or badly, a speech that has not been written by them and in that they are not speaking to me. I feel the same, I should say, with articles signed by any

leading politician in the Sunday newspaper, which I know perfectly well are not written by them; you're lucky if they've even looked at it. And I feel the same about the prefabricated phrases that I feel… those people are no longer talking to me, what they're doing is they are performing. And I'm not a political audience, I'm part of a political debate. And there is a sense, and I'm prepared to be put down here, in which I think that…the…that I am being treated as if I don't know the background to all this. And this is not a conversation anymore, to use a kind of now very old fashioned but, anymore than you'd have a conversation with a speaking clock – it's just someone who's going on.

Now part of your report, I think, was focussed really on how to reintroduce real argument, real citizenly debate into political rhetoric of all kinds. Now I'm not sure that in this, I'm particularly bothered by issues of trust. I think sometimes if people don't trust politicians, well, they've got it right. You know, this is…and the idea that they should…that we'll be pleased if they trusted this bunch of shysters, I think that's really up for grabs. But I am, nevertheless, leaving trust aside, worried about how we have fallen into – and this is very much what you're talking about, Phil – how we've fallen into a rhetoric of outrage. Not just slogan but, you know, lock her up or, you know, try Twitter any day of the week, a rhetoric of outrage and how we can actually think about that within new media of being replaced by argument. How we can have really not outrage but, as you talk about here, about persuasion, about informed and responsible persuasion. Now to push your arguments a bit further, I think it's connected with wider issues about democracy that lack of a sense of long-term persuasion. And it does seem to me, and this is not solely about Brexit though obviously that's brought it here to a head but it's not caused it I think, that the discourse of politics over the last few years, probably ten or twenty, has tended to reduce the democratic process to the ballot box. You know, if I vote for something that's been a democratic act and therefore that should happen. And, you know, it's, as I say, it's not just Brexit, it's also, you know, pictures we have from places we've disgracefully

invaded on the front of newspapers like yours showing a woman in a burka putting a vote in a ballot box and… it's democracy, which earns anything; no it doesn't, bloody likely doesn't.

And if you were to say to the fifth century Athenians they would say: "well in part, you know, up to a point", but they would instantly tell you that democracy rested on the availability of reliable information on which you could make your mind up how to vote and on the ability of the citizens to have an equal right to engage in constructive debate about that vote. And I think that is something that is not just we don't have but we can actually be ridiculed for even wanting to claim. I can't tell you how often on Twitter when I make a comment, a political comment, which someone doesn't agree with, I will get the reply saying: "stick to Roman history, love", you know, or that's better than: "stick to your knitting, dear", you know, and you get them. But as if somehow views with which you do not agree are illegitimate contributions to debate and that seems to me an absolutely fundamental thing that we have to recoup.

But that phrase, you know: "stick to Roman history, dear" also raises the last point I want to make because I think there are issues of gender in this. I very much doubt that my friend Simon Schama, who intervenes on Twitter most… more "stridently" – I use that word in inverted commas – than I do, I very much doubt he gets tweets saying "stick to Rembrandt, love" you know [audience laughter]. And I think…

PC: I'm very tempted to send him one now. [Audience laughter]

MB: I do wonder, I thought it was something your report didn't really grapple with, just how all these things that you talk about work differently for men and for women, and how far, although there are some exceptions, and we all know who those will be, how far the modern world has actually, by whatever tortuous path, inherited ancient ideas about the illegitimacy of female speech. You know, it's not just Roman antiquarians who think that women speaking in public sound like the barking of dogs or the braying of donkeys. I think we're still in a world

in which women's voices, when they attempt to claim authority, are taken like this. So I suppose the question that I would end with was that: do you think you need a slightly differently inflected set of principles if you wanted to truly incorporate women as authoritative speakers within this debate, because, by and large, I think they're currently not. Thank you.

[Audience applause]

HvdB: Thank you. Thank you very much, Mary, and ending with a question is a very apt way of segue-waying into our Q and A.

Transcript provided by Ben Salisbury, Doctoral Researcher in the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham.