Running for office

ALEXANDER TULLOCH

Elections and etymology

BY THE time you read this article we in Great Britain will probably have been through the process (or should that be charade?) of a general election when we will all be expected to choose who will represent (or misrepresent) us in Parliament. Any day now politicians will start running around kissing babies and turning up on our doorsteps asking for our support. Currying favour with the electorate they will even offer to take the old and infirm to the polling stations in the hope that such beneficence will encourage their charges to cast their votes for them. And of course they will attempt to persuade us that their party is the only one with the policies necessary to get us out of the economic mire we find ourselves in, omitting to say that politicians helped put us there in the first place. *O tempora, o mores!*

For the origins of the terminology we use in politics we must turn, as is so often the case, to ancient Greek and Latin for the answers to our questions. The term 'democratic elections', for instance, is a perfect example how we frequently combine Greek and Latin roots in English expressions without even being aware of it. The word 'democracy' is directly borrowed from the Greek *dēmokratia*, a compound of two elements, *dēmos* 'people' 'common folk' and *kratos* 'power', 'strength' and thus quite literally means 'power of the people'. 'Elections' on the other hand, take their origin from the Latin *eligĕre* 'to choose' 'to pick out'. So when we talk of a candidate being 'democratically elected' we are simply using classical forms to state that he or she was chosen by ordinary people using their power.

Of course the whole purpose of these elections is to choose the people who, in theory at least, have those abilities, qualifications and personal attributes which should allow them to govern us fairly and efficiently. To put it another way, we entrust to their (hopefully) capable hands the daily management of 'the ship of state' and the metaphor is no accident. It relates to the concept of control, whether of a ship or a country, being expressed etymologically by the Latin expressions *gŭberno* 'I steer' and *gŭbernātor* 'helmsman' and later 'governor' 'director'.

Another Latin expression which we should mention in this context is *res publica*, literally 'public affair', 'things concerning the people' which has evolved into our term 'republic'. In other words, *res publica* mirrors the Greek



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dēmocratia so closely that when the American Democrats and Republicans battle it out at election time there is, linguistically speaking, very little to distinguish between them.

The basic idea of democratic elections, as we all know, has come down to us from the thinkers and theorists of 5th-century Athens when philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle taught their contemporaries the importance of political and philosophical debate and how vital it was for the ordinary people to have a say in who was going to govern them. And the ordinary citizens were expected to take an active part in the running of their cities and were looked on as being very odd if they did not. In fact, anyone who did not relish the thought of becoming involved in the running of his city was termed *idiotēs*, which we would translate as 'a private person', 'someone who keeps himself to himself'. But it is also the term that has given us the word 'idiot'. Presumably the ancient Greeks viewed anyone who took no interest in the affairs of state as an *obol* short of a *drachma*!

The Greek term for a city or 'city state' was *polis*, a word derived from Sanskrit *purí* 'town' and an even earlier Indo-European root *par /*pal 'to fill' which leads us to the conclusion that the original sense of the Sanskrit and Greek words was a place 'filled' with people. Of course if an area could be described as being 'full' the implication would be that it is inhabited by many people or 'the many', the Greek for which is *hoi polloi*, a phrase adapted into modern English as a contemptuous term for the masses.

In order for the *polis* to run smoothly and function efficiently there would have to be certain rules and regulations by which people agreed to live to avoid descent into total anarchy (Greek *an-* 'without' and *archia* 'rule'). In other words those in power would have to devise a *politeia*, a summary of the rights and duties of each citizen and this noun eventually made its appearance in English as 'policy'. Then, in eighteenth century England, when the first body was set up responsible for ensuring public order, the term chosen was 'police force', literally, the force responsible for maintaining law and order in the *polis*. And *polis* is the same word that crops up in words now familiar in English: 'the Acropolis' ('the high town') and 'metropolis' ('the mother town').

It is easy now to see how the Greek concept of the city-state has shaped our own ways of thinking when it comes to affairs of the nation. Any member of the public who has aspirations of running for office and having a hand in organising our lives is known throughout the English speaking world as a 'politician', i.e. somebody who expresses concern about how the *polis* is governed. And victory in the ensuing campaigns always goes to the most ambitious candidates, a phrase bursting with etymological provenance.

In ancient Rome it was the custom for a citizen who was being considered for an important official position to wear a white toga, the Latin for which was *candida toga*, a phrase which has become compressed into the English word 'candidate'. If such an aspiring public figure was really serious about being chosen he would be expected to walk about town talking to as many people as possible as he tried to persuade them to vote for him. And two Latin words come into play here: the inseparable prefix *amb-* 'about' and *ire* 'to walk', which combine to form the infinitive *ambīre* 'to walk about'. This then produced *ambitiōsus* (hence 'ambitious'), an adjective applied literally to anyone who did a lot of walking around and figuratively to designate a citizen who was eager for public office.

When the would-be organisers of our lives have done all they can to persuade us to elect them and the great day dawns when we turn up at the polling stations to put our crosses next to the candidate of our choice another word, never heard in any other context, comes out of the locker: the hustings. Now generally accepted as applying to the proceedings leading up to the election, it was historically used in Britain as a term for the platform on which candidates stood as they harangued the crowds and made their pre-election promises. But for the original meaning of the word we have to journey back in time to Anglo-Saxon Britain when the word entered the language as a borrowing from Old Norse *húsðing* (hústhing). Literally this would translate as 'house council' and was a term applied to a gathering of the King's household at which important matters of the day would be discussed. From a linguistic point of view the interesting point here is how the word 'thing' changed its meaning over the centuries. In Norse and Saxon time the word was applied to the gathering but eventually it came to signify the matters or 'things' discussed at the meeting

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and then developed even further until it acquired the meaning of a tangible, concrete object it has today. A modern survival of the original meaning can still be seen in the Norwegian parliament which is known as the *Storting* or 'Great Council'.

When all the hullabaloo of the pre-election campaign is over and we all wend our ways dutifully to the polling stations the etymological candle burns just as brightly. A 'polling' station takes its name from the Old English word 'poll' or 'head' (as in 'tadpoll' or 'toad head') and is a reference in an election context to the days when only the people who had paid their 'poll tax' or 'tax per head of population' were eligible to vote.

Once at the polling station we now put a cross on our 'ballot papers': but why 'ballot' papers? The point here is that the modern cross has replaced the 'little ball' or *ballotta* which was dropped into a pot to record a vote in sixteenth century Venice. And the word 'vote' has come down to us from the Latin *votum* or 'wish' as the cross on the ballot paper is an indication of the person we 'wish' to fight our corner in Parliament.

All democratic systems of government involve assemblies of one sort or another gathering together on a more or less regular basis in order to deal with national and international problems of the day. The term the English chose for this body was 'parliament' derived from the Norman French noun *parlement* and the verb *parler* 'to talk'. When the Russians, after the fall of Communism in the early nineties, were seeking a descriptive term for their new assembly, they resurrected an old term *duma*, a noun derived from the verb *dumat'* 'to think.' Now a cynic might be forgiven for observing that in Britain the people elect representatives from their midst who will gather in London every now and again and talk about what needs to be done. In Russia, however, the representatives gather in Moscow and just think about it. ■

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