 "That Her Majesty’s Ministers are unworthy of the confidence of the country": Rhetoric and Agenda-Setting in the Nineteenth-Century British Parliamentary Culture of Debate

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to look at how parliamentary practice was conceptualised in the nineteenth-century British debating culture, more specifically in the way debate topics were formulated in the Cambridge and Oxford Union Societies. The paper draws from a PhD study (Haapala 2012) that sought to find out to what extent the Unions followed parliamentary practices and procedure. It was argued that the Union Societies and the House of Commons formed a parliamentary culture of debate. In the issues debated in Unions from the 1830s until the 1870s it is possible to find four rhetorical topoi in use: vote of confidence, principle, character, expediency. It is claimed that these topoi represent the way members of the Union Societies understood parliamentary politics. In the paper I intend to follow up on this claim and pursue towards a more detailed theory of parliamentary rhetoric of agenda. First, I shall provide an interpretation of the British nineteenth-century parliamentary culture of debate by looking at the rhetorical commonplaces in use in the debate topics put forward in the Union Societies. Second, I ask what the findings indicate in terms of the practice and study of parliamentarism in general.

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Introduction

The topic of this paper is the formation of modern parliamentary oratory in Britain and its relevance to the conception of parliamentarism today. My treatment of this subject is based on my doctoral study that concentrated on the interchange of political ideas between the nineteenth-century House of Commons and the Union Societies at Cambridge and Oxford. I will present my interpretation of the establishment of this very specific culture of debate in Britain while I’m especially attentive to the persistence of the relevance of classical oratory in its practices.

There are a number of historians who have written about the relation between language and power in various periods of time in English politics,¹ and also some political theorists have recognised the benefit of using a historical approach in studying parliamentary politics with a special characteristic of speaking for and against.² As a follower of this discussion, my view is that taking into account the historical role of deliberative rhetoric in parliamentary politics serves to improve our understanding of democratic politics today. My contribution to this discussion is to propose that we take a look into the past to find new ways to make sense of deliberative rhetoric in any parliamentary context. In this paper, I highlight that there are also other ‘parliamentary bodies’ than what we would conceive as traditional deliberative assemblies in the context of a state that deserve further political study.

In the history of political rhetoric the role of public oratory is a vital one. Cicero identified deliberative oratory as the primary model of political speech. According to him and many other Roman authors, politics is a matter of persuading audience of one’s own case and of defeating the opponent. In other words, deliberative rhetoric aims at a

practical end, not at answering to any abstract questions (Remer 1999, 41). This republican view accepts the role of public debate and emotional appeals to audience. Thus factional strife and controversy are fundamental elements of democratic politics. (Fontana 2005, 33) It is a point that creates controversy among political theorists even today. Proponents of ‘deliberative democracy’ have turned the attention from political debate to conversation as the primary example of political communication (Remer 1999, 39). They argue that politics should be conducted through rational conversation aiming at consensus. Cicero, however, identified conversation as a form of dialogue only suited for private discussion (ibid. 40). Deliberative democrats associate rhetoric with manipulation and coercion and, therefore, opt for conversation as a public form of speech suitable to political arenas. Its popularity among political theorists has contributed to the neglect of the study of deliberative rhetoric in arenas of political debate, of which parliament serves as an example *par excellence.*

Among historians it is widely recognised that ancient rhetorical literature, especially Cicero’s writings, were influential in early modern Europe. Markku Peltonen (2013) has recently discussed the interplay between classical rhetoric and popular politics in the pre-revolutionary England. He has shown that the teachings of ancient Roman rhetoricians on deliberative rhetoric were rehabilitated by English schoolmasters. The established rhetorical culture penetrated the political language of the time. But the rhetorical patterns had already been embedded in the parliamentary political institutions earlier. Peter Mack (2002), for example, has shown that the Elizabethan courts and parliaments used classical rhetoric in their proceedings. This means that the procedures and rules that became the backbone of British parliamentary democracy in the nineteenth century were forged by various political practices over centuries.

My contribution to this discussion here is to look at nineteenth-century British parliamentary political culture with a special focus on the continued influence of classical rhetoric. This paper takes a look at how the parliamentary political culture of debate was translated into the debating practices of the Union Societies at Cambridge and Oxford, and argues that the *topoi* of deliberative rhetoric advocated in early modern period continued to be part of the nineteenth-century political culture.
I will first put forward my argument that the Union Societies became included in the British parliamentary culture of debate during the nineteenth century. I will then present examples of the Unions’ debating practices with a special focus on the adoption of parliamentary procedure. Finally, I shall present my tentative analysis of the continued relevance of classical rhetoric in nineteenth-century British political culture.

The Union Societies and the British parliamentary culture of debate

The Union Societies were formed by university students in early nineteenth century. The Cambridge Union was founded in 1815 and its sister organisation in Oxford in 1823. They promoted debate at a time when it did not play a key role in the university curriculum (Gribble 1924, 42). Both Unions struggled to establish themselves without financial or any other kind of support from the universities. At the time university authorities considered political debate suspicious. This was mainly due to the difficult political situation that was stirring in the country. For example, free speech and association were restricted by a parliamentary act in 1817. There was a strong demand for reform that inspired various public gatherings. The government was trying to keep in control a number of extra-parliamentary movements demanding for universal suffrage and shorter parliaments that were considered potentially revolutionary. The political crisis finally subsided due to the passing of the Reform Act in 1832.

In the nineteenth century Parliament’s constitutional role, especially the influence of the lower house, grew particularly strong. The idea of popular sovereignty was perceived to realise itself in the practice of ‘parliamentary government’ that gradually became the dominant constitutional arrangement after the 1832 parliamentary reform. Governments became dependent on the consent of the majority of the House of Commons. The ‘parliamentary government’ functioned on the authority of well-established statesmen and their skills to form party alliances. By the mid-nineteenth century a parliamentarian’s reputation was dependent on his oratorical skills, and debating societies became instrumental in providing training (Grainger 1969, 15).

There were roughly three types of political associations relating to the parliamentary culture of the time. First of all, there were extra-parliamentary movements demanding parliamentary reform in the 1830s and 1840s that attracted thousands of people. Such
political associations — the best example of which had been the Anti-Corn Law League — relied on platform oratory (Ostrogorski 1964, 67). While these radical clubs and associations had an important role as pressure groups, they did not remain active after the Parliament started to enact the reforms they called for. Thus these movements did not seriously threaten Parliament as a constitutional institution during the period. Rather, their aim was to increase parliamentary representation (ibid. 69).

Secondly, there were a number of private political clubs that had parliamentary connections. The most famous, and still existing, are the Carlton and Reform Clubs. Conservatives established the Carlton Club after the fall of the Duke of Wellington's government in 1830. It became the political headquarters of the Conservative party until 1853 (Phelps 1983, 1-2). The Reform Club was founded in 1836 with the intention to organise the Whigs and Radicals for the cause of reform (Woodbridge 1978, 2). They have traditionally been described as the first political clubs, due to their connections with the formation of party organisations. This understanding can be challenged for at least two reasons. First of all, there had previously existed political clubs formed around leading parliamentarians, such as the various Pitt Clubs. Second, what is termed ‘political’ in connection with the clubs of the time fails to take into account those that were not directly tied to party politics.

The Unions represent a third kind of political association that had a distinct relationship to parliamentary culture in Britain during the period. Unlike extra-parliamentary movements or the Carlton and Reform Clubs they were not organised around any specific policy or party political agenda. They promoted debate rather than advocated platform oratory. At first, the Unions functioned as debating clubs with a rather limited membership. The Oxford Union elected new members by blackballing in 1823 which was rather a common method in various English clubs at the time. It meant that even a single member could stop a candidate from getting elected. Around this time the Union in Cambridge moved to the election proceeding by ballot with a three-fourth’s majority needed for entry (see e.g. CUS laws 1824). This meant that the Unions became more open to all university students and, thus, a growing number of undergraduates had the opportunity to participate in the Union debates and other activities.
The Unions were operating in an environment that had strong links to Parliament. Since early seventeenth century the old English universities had held seats in the House of Commons (for an elaboration, see Meisel 2008). But what really distinguished the Unions from other political clubs and associations of the period was the way they used parliamentary rules and procedure in their debating practices. In the period after the 1832 Reform Act the Unions started gradually adopt parliamentary procedure in their debating practices. By the 1850s the Union Societies had grown in membership significantly and their debates attracted outside attention. At Oxford it was common to invite visitors to attend debates. A number of newspaper announcements of the issues debated in the Unions were published accompanied by the voting results. In the university environment Unions’ debates enabled students to get into contact with parliamentary politics. University students became knowledgeable in parliamentary procedure, which was not possible only through reading newspaper reports and magazines. In contrast to the generation of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, members of the Union Societies were professionalising in parliamentary-styled debating before entering Parliament. Consequently, the members became fluent in the parliamentary style of doing politics. For example, the Unions’ minute books show expert use of parliamentary-styled motions, amendments, and adjournments.

The Unions’ proceedings and the significance of procedure

In my PhD thesis I studied how parliamentary politics was translated in the debating practices of the Union Societies in the mid-nineteenth century (see Haapala 2012). I argued that the procedural forms by which the debates were guided show how the Union members understood political action. In order to elaborate on that argument I first show some examples of the debating practices used in the Unions.

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3 Both Union Societies banned publication of their debates. Despite the restriction some members of the Societies informed about the meetings to newspapers. Once the Unions established themselves in academic life rules concerning visitors became less strict. The Oxford Union started to publish its proceedings of debates in 1856. At Cambridge members of the Union were given right to publish the subject of debate, the result and the names of speakers in 1868.

4 A discussion of the late eighteenth-century education of parliamentarians is provided in Christopher Reid, Imprison’d Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons, 1760-1800 (Oxford, 2012), ch. 6.
The Unions made a distinction between private and public meetings. The private ones largely dealt with the management of the societies, whereas the public debates were about topics that did not concern the Unions directly. Here I concentrate on the public debates. In the following, I will present two examples, one from each Union Society. They are shown here in the same format as they are found in the original records. In the Example 1, the topic of debate is “That Her Majesty’s Ministers are unworthy of the confidence of the country” (CUS minute book vol. 13, 24 February 1846). The second example from Oxford Union presents the debate topic “That Sir Robert Peel’s Government has forfeited the confidence of the country” (OUS minute book vol. VI, 17 April 1845). In fact, both refer to the same Peel government but with a rather different formulation.

EXAMPLE 1: Cambridge Union public debate

**Tuesday, February 24th, 1846**
Mr. J. Baird, Trin. Coll. President in the chair.
Mr. E. S. Cayley, Trin. Coll, moved.

That Her Majesty’s Ministers are unworthy of the confidence of the country.

**Affirmative**
Mr. E. S. Cayley, Trin. Coll.
Mr. J. S. Shrupp, Trin.
Mr. H. Lindsay, Trin.
Mr. R. A. Barlow, St John’s
Mr. G. J. Cayley, Trin.
Mr. G. W. Hastings, Christs
Mr. A. A. Vansittart, Trin.

**Negative**
Mr. S. C. Rawsthorne, Trin. Coll.
Mr. R. D. Baxter, Trin.
Mr. J. Gordon, Trin.
Mr. J. Dacre, Trin.

At half past nine pm on the motion of Mr. C. Bristed, Trin. Coll. the Debate was adjourned until Tuesday the 3rd March.

Mr. Bristed in possession of the House.

**Tuesday, March 3rd, 1846**
Mr. J. Baird, Trin. Coll., President, in the chair.

Adjourned debate from Tuesday the 24th Feb.

That Her Majesty’s Minister’s [sic] are unworthy the confidence of the country.

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5 The minutes provide official documentation about the debates; their topic, when the debate took place, about who had been for and who against, and, finally, what was the result. After the names of each speaker, the records will also mention the colleges they are representing.
Speakers in the negative only
Mr. C. Bristed, Trin. Coll.
Mr. A. Garfit, Trin.
Mr. W. Hale, Trin. Hall.

The Honourable Opener having replied the House divided
Ayes 50
Noes 70
 Majority 20.

EXAMPLE 2: Oxford Union public debate

Thursday, April 17, 1845.
Wyatt’s Rooms.
Mr. Pott, Magdalen, President, in the Chair.
Mr. Giffard, Merton, moved:

That Sir Robert Peel's Government has forfeited the confidence of the country.

Speakers
In the Affirmative. In the Negative.
Mr. Giffard, Merton. Mr. Wodehouse, Ch. Ch.
Mr. Higgin, St. Mary Hall.
Hon. P. Smythe, Merton.
Mr. Blackett, Ch. Ch.

Mr. Chermside, Exeter, moved an Adjournment, which was carried.

Thursday, April 24, 1845.
Wyatt’s Rooms.
Mr. Pott, Magdalen, President, in the Chair.

Adjourned debate.
Rev. J. F. Mackarness, Exeter, resumed the Debate.

Speakers
In the Affirmative. In the Negative.
Mr. Blackett, Merton. Rev. J. F. Mackarness, Exeter.
Mr. Chermside, Exeter. Mr. Plumptre, Brasenose.

Mr. Pakington, Ch. Ch., moved the Adjournment of the Debate, which was carried.

Friday, May 2, 1845.
Wyatt’s Rooms.
Mr. Cazenove, Brasenose, President, in the Chair.

Adjourned debate.
Mr. Pakington, Ch. Ch., resumed the Debate.

Speakers
In the Affirmative. In the Negative.
Mr. Field, Exeter. Mr. Pakington, Ch. Ch.
Mr. Cholmondeley, Oriel.  

The President.  

Rev. D. P. Chase, Oriel.  

Mr. Pott, Magdalen, moved the Adjournment of the Debate, which was carried.

Thursday, May 8, 1845. 

Wyatt’s Rooms. 

Mr. Cazenove, Brasenose, President, in the Chair.

Adjourned debate. 

Mr. Pott, Magdalen, resumed the Debate.

Speakers 

In the Affirmative.  

Mr. Gladstone, Magdalen Hall.  

Mr. Stanton, Balliol. 

In the Negative.  

Mr. Pott, Magdalen.  

Mr. Nowell, Brasenose.  

Mr. Simpson, Oriel. 

Mr. Giffard replied.

Division 

Ayes 39 

Noes 63 

Majority against 24

As is shown in both of the examples, the argumentation for and against the proposed topic has not been written down at all. Rather than showing the actual words that had been uttered, Unions usually simply recorded the proceedings without the argumentation. What it tells us is that the rules were taken very seriously. In other words, it seems that the proceedings were important in themselves.

In both of the cases the original proposals have remained the motions to which the members spoke. In debates like this there are amendments or adjournments proposed to the original motions that gives the members opportunity to get time to know more about the topic before their turn to join the debate. They also might have proposed adjournments in order to gather more supporters to secure a majority. Especially in the Example 2, we can see that there are three adjourned debates on the same topic.

In the Union Societies the agendas for public business meetings were set either by members themselves or by their standing committees. At Cambridge it was the tradition to decide among all the members present in a public meeting after voting on a debate

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6 This was actually a practice that was used in other debating societies as well, e.g. in the University College London Debating Society.
what questions would be debated next. In the early days of the Cambridge Union, members were each in turn required to participate in formulating debate topics: “Every member shall open a debate in his turn, unless he provide a substitute; but a preference shall be given to the proposer of the question chosen” (CUS laws 1824, 7). However, only two years later the rule was amended so that “any member may propose a subject for debate, [...] but if no question be proposed, it shall be incumbent on the Treasurer and Secretary each to submit one to the choice of the Society” (CUS laws 1826, 4). The obligation to submit questions for debate was thereby transferred to the elected officers of the Society. But choosing the topics remained in the hands of the full meeting, not a committee.

At Oxford Union Society the committee (later known as the ‘standing committee’) was mainly in charge of the agenda. However, any member could propose a debate topic by delivering a written notice of it to the standing committee (OUS rules 1856, 40). Debate topics were, at first, chosen and announced three weeks before they were put before the meeting. The rule was, however, later changed and thereafter the announcement was required only five days before the debate (OUS rules 1856, 36), leaving less time to get acquainted with the subject. After the selection of topic was made, the question was put in the form of a motion at the next public business meeting. Cambridge was somewhat slower in their parliamentarisation of the rules. From very early on, however, both Union Societies had already adopted the parliamentary rule that limited members to speaking only once on the same topic (e.g. CUS laws 1824, OUS rules 1837). In the debates the speakers could only speak for and against a question, which is the most familiar format for parliamentary speaking.

A parliamentary body is an assembly of which the primary function is not to legislate, but to debate according to certain rules (Redlich 1908, 215). According to this definition, the Union Societies meet the criteria. The debating practices of the nineteenth-century Union Societies were deeply affected by the parliamentary culture of debate. This was also shown in the agenda setting of the public meetings. Agenda setting in the Union Societies was limited to a rule that a subject that had already been debated upon during one term was not allowed to be discussed again. That rule is also part of parliamentary procedure (cf. May 1844, 186). Adopted since the seventeenth century, a question once put and decided upon was not allowed to be re-introduced
during the same session ‘but must stand as a judgment of the House’ (Hatsell 1818, 125). The rule was applied with the aim of minimising surprises and unresolved questions before the House.

What I have described here are just some examples of a more consistent form of adoption of parliamentary procedure in the Unions’ debates. But there were also subtle rhetorical aspects embedded in their proceedings. For example, the minutes of the debates provide certain information about the time and the place in which the Unions operated. The meetings were affected by parliamentary vocabulary and rules. The Unions used terms such as ‘house’, ‘division’, ‘motion’ and so forth. Moreover, their rules indicate the adoption of parliamentary procedure by the late 1840s. All of this suggests that the Union Societies were keen to adopt parliamentary rhetoric and put it into use in order to learn more about politics in the national level.

The Unions’ agenda setting and elements of classical rhetoric

Rhetorically the setting of political agenda refers to inventio. In a parliamentary setting inventio is translated precisely as the necessity to debate either for or against an issue, where the speakers use the commonplaces particular to the debate themes to persuade their audience. In classical rhetoric topoi refer to conventions that are learnt and used in appropriate circumstances. Here I will focus on the formulations of motions presented in the Union Societies through a categorisation of the topoi most commonly seen in the resolutions of their debates.

The Union Societies debated on various themes, including political, historical and literary subjects. The emphasis, however, was on daily politics that occupied the agenda of most of their public debates. That itself shows the high interest of university students towards politics. In order to make sense of how the members conceived of political action I have turned my attention to the way the debate topics were formulated. By doing so it is possible to come closer to understanding the Union members’ knowledge of parliamentary politics.

In my dissertation I conducted a rhetorical reading of the minutes of the public meetings, including information on both motions and resolutions. (see Haapala 2012,
Given that the motions entail resolutions, the following categorisation provides a tool for understanding what kind of resolutions the debates were aimed at. According to my interpretation, the *topoi* of the resolutions of the Unions’ debates can be divided into four categories: vote of confidence, principle, expediency and character. While making this categorisation, it was assumed that the formulations of the debate topics are directed towards certain resolutions: the speakers of each debate spoke for and against the given motion before voting on them.

The vote taken after the debate is the moment when a motion turns into a resolution. This is called a ‘division’ which has a very special rhetorical meaning. It is a sign of oratory instead of that of conversation because it suggests that the debates aimed at decisions to act as opposed to open-ended discussion (Remer 1999, 45-46). This is a crucial point for the analysis of the Union Societies’ debates because it means that their aim was not mere philosophic discussion. The proposing of motions in a parliamentary manner instead of simply raising questions for discussion is one of the key elements that defined the Union Societies as deliberative assemblies. In fact, the parliamentary procedure that was gradually adopted in the Unions maintains oratory’s agonistic ideal emphasised in classical rhetoric (cf. Remer 1999, 48). The Union Societies did not consist of a group of friends or like-minded people. They experienced factional strife that put the interests of the majority against the minority that is characteristic to any deliberative assembly (cf. Fontana 2005, 33).

In the course of the Unions’ debates, original motions were amended and additions to them were moved. The amendments show that the contents of the motions were sometimes challenged during the argumentation. In short, there was competition over defining the contents of subsequent resolutions. The motions indicate a systematic, repetitive use of certain expressions. My categorisation of the resolutions of the Union Societies public debates should be considered as abstractions of the debates, not representations of their substance. For example, a ‘vote of confidence’ directs attention to a course of action. At the same time, it refers to representation: whether or not the actions of elected representatives merit approval. For example, in the event that a motion was formulated “That Her Majesty's Ministers are unworthy of the confidence of the country” (Example 1) it is fair to assume that the debate for and against included
arguments either supporting or opposing the government in office. The object of the debate, therefore, and ultimately the resolution, was a vote of confidence.

Another instance of ‘vote of confidence’ is represented by Example 2: “That Sir Robert Peel’s Government has forfeited the confidence of the country”. It is probable to assume here that the debate on the resolution was about whether or not Peel’s government did hold the confidence of the country. The frequent appearance of the topos of vote of confidence is not surprising considering the political context in which the constitutional arrangement of ‘parliamentary government’ was dominant. In fact, its use seems to mark a difference between the nineteenth-century British parliamentary oratory and the classical theories and pre-revolutionary English humanist curriculum that did not recognise a similar topos of deliberative rhetoric.

The mid-nineteenth century, on which my research material is focused, was marked by the constant demand for further reforms. During the period between 1828 and 1832 the total number of petitions was 23,283 and by 1838-1842 the number was 70,072. The peak was reached after the Second Reform Act in 1867 with a total of 101,573. (Jenkins 1996, 16) This kind of interest towards parliamentary politics was further encouraged by the publicity of the House of Commons and the professionalisation of political journalism, among other things. Until early nineteenth century the nation had largely remained unaware of the procedures of debate in the House of Commons due to the reluctance of Parliament to make its proceedings public. Political controversies inside Parliament attracted attention and the importance of parliamentary debates to the British politics grew stronger due to the press reports and public discussion.

The rhetorical aspect of ‘vote of confidence’ is best illustrated by debates that included an additional motion, such as a rider or an amendment. As an example, on 9 June in 1836, the Oxford Union Society debated the motion “That the present ministry are undeserving of the confidence of the country”, to which a rider was moved “That our want of confidence is occasioned by their cowardice in shrinking from the obvious duty of destroying the present Church Establishment in Ireland, and of adapting generally the institutions of the country to the inevitable progress of Democracy” (OUS minute book vol. IV, 9 June 1836). Had this additional argument gained a majority of votes, it would have been added to the original motion. In that sense it would have added more
argumentative power to the resolution. Those who would have been in favour of the original motion in the first place would, however, have to be persuaded that these were the precise reasons for their disapproval of the ministry. The house was then adjourned and the debate resumed on 11 June, when a competing rider was moved:

That our want of confidence is grounded as well on the degrading alliance with O'Connell, as on the miserable experience which the English people have had of genuine Whig policy, the supporters of which have consulted the interests of a faction at the expense of a nation, have preferred tortuous paths to an honest and straightforward course, availing themselves of temporary expedients, instead of relying on fixed principles, and have ever been found the ready tools for measures, the disastrous consequences of which they were not sagacious enough to foresee, or too unprincipled to regard. (OUS minute book vol. IV, 11 June 1836; emphasis added, TH)

In this second rider, the Whig policy in general is rhetorically portrayed as unreliable, whereas in the first one the disapprobation is directed against only one incident of which the Whig government was responsible. Debating on whether or not the house should give its confidence to a ministry, members of the Union Society were trying to persuade the audience of whether or not they should make a resolution for or against the party that held the confidence of the majority of the House of Commons. Also, it shows how parliamentary debates of the period could potentially still pose a threat to ministries due to the non-established character of political parties. This helps to explain why the contemporary press was so keen to publish even the most minimal information about the debates in the Union Societies: the result of voting for and against the present ministry was considered of importance because it potentially affected and reflected opinion-building inside the universities. The formulation of the second rider above reveals two additional topos: principle and expediency. The Whig policy was claimed to resort to ‘temporary expedients’ and it was named as ‘unprincipled’. As in this case, the two topos are often used in opposition to each other in deliberative rhetoric.

In cases where a motion suggested that a course of action should be based on a certain theory or question of morality, it is here considered a resolution based on ‘principle’. It was the most frequently employed topos of the four as it represents a form of opinion based on political preference in relation to a course of action. An example of it is provided by a Cambridge debate in 1852: “That it is desirable the British possessions at the Cape of Good Hope be abandoned” (CUS minute book vol. 15, 26 October 1852). The formulation here shows that the debate topics proposed in the Unions were at times rather abstract. To debate whether or not something is desirable was not a question of a
practical judgment on a matter of urgency, but rather a case in which the members had
to rely on their own ideas of political principle and convey them to audience. The focus,
however, was more on the persuasion rather than providing counsel, which is the aim of
philosophical conversation.\(^7\) An amendment\(^8\) to the motion was formulated as follows:
“That all after the word ‘That’ be omitted, and the following substituted: “this House,
considering the Cape of Good Hope, in its present state, a very unprofitable possession,
is of opinion, that more energetic measures for subjugating the Kaffirs should be
immediately adopted.” (ibid.) In the original motion there seems to be no indication of
the grounds for the argument. In the amendment, however, one reason for why the
possession of the Cape of Good Hope should be abandoned has been provided. This
reveals that motions that are formulated in the form of ‘principle’ usually entail a value
judgment that is not always directly expressed. The motions that included some kind of
principle suggest that, in order to pass them as resolutions, the debate had to include a
judgment on conduct that was more speculative than based on immediate experience.
Furthermore, debates with the intention to decide about a principle often had the
qualities of deliberative rhetoric with an orientation towards future or present action.
The following motion provides an example: “That the government of this country ought
to use all its influence in order to secure the liberties of Poland; but it would not be
justified in making war with Russia on behalf of that country” (CUS minute book vol. 18,
17 November 1863). It was followed by an amendment: “That all after the word ‘That’
be omitted, and the following substituted: “the Government of this Country ought to
abstain from all diplomatic action for the settlement of the dispute between the Russian
Government and the Poles, as worse than nugatory, unless they are prepared for the
alternative of War” (ibid.). In this case as well, it seems that the amendment specifies
the matter to which the original motion is referring. It must also be noted that here we
see both the *topos* of ‘vote of confidence’ and that of ‘principle’ in a case where
government policies are mentioned. Although they may both refer to certain policy
decisions, a vote of confidence either approves or disapproves of an action and principle
sets a moral judgment on a course of action.

\(^7\) The use of abstract questions to support one’s own arguments is an oratorical
technique of which Cicero also took notice. (Remer 1999, 46)
\(^8\) Amendments always proposed a new formulation. Usually they were not allowed to be
in complete opposition to the original. Rather, they presented a modified alternative to
the kind of resolution the original motion would have resulted in.
‘Principle’ is found especially in those formulations that imply a potential action without reference to a specific case. These kinds of motions clearly suggest deliberative rhetoric, although there might not be any immediate contextual reference in the formulation. Whereas ‘principle’ rather connotes de-personalisation, ‘character’ implied personalisation of political activity. In that sense the *topos* of ‘character’ rhetorically focuses the attention to certain political conduct and ‘principle’ takes distance from it.

Most statements about ‘character’ referred to an individual conduct in the present: “That Mr. Gladstone’s political conduct since the General Election has been dignified, consistent, and patriotic” (OUS minute book vol. VIII, 10 February 1853). In this particular instance the debate was adjourned three times. The first debate was adjourned and continued on 17 February when there appeared four amendments to the original motion. The first amendment was offered by Hunt of Christ Church: “That Mr. Gladstone’s position in the present ministry cannot as yet be sufficiently appreciated” (Hunt: OUS minute book vol. VIII, 17 February 1853). Hunt’s formulation is more cautious than the one in the original motion. A longer formulation appears in the amendment by Rogers of Wadham College: “That we view with unmingled regret and disappointment the position assumed by Mr. Gladstone towards Lord Derby’s Government, and his subsequent coalition with the Whigs, as uncalled for by political exigencies, inconsistent with his whole past career, and tending to render permanent the disruption of the Conservative Party” (Rogers: OUS minute book vol. VIII, 17 February 1853). Rogers’ amendment seems to be the most critical of Gladstone’s conduct. It blames Gladstone for having secured his own political position by abandoning his party. The third amendment is proposed by Fowler of Merton College: “That the general conduct of Mr. Gladstone deserved the support of the Members of this University at the last election” (Fowler: OUS minute book vol. VIII, 17 February 1853). Fowler’s amendment explicitly refers to the main reason why the debate was so interesting to the members of the society, which was due to the fact that Gladstone represented the University of Oxford in the House of Commons. Gladstone also represented a direct link between the Union Society and Parliament. Therefore, resolutions of the society over his conduct had particular importance.

Fremantle of Balliol College presented the fourth amendment in the debate: “That Mr. Gladstone’s conduct in joining the present Government is honourable to himself and
beneficial to the country” (Fremantle: OUS minute book vol. VIII, 17 February 1853). Fremantle extends the idea of Gladstone’s conduct from his character to the benefit of the country. In a way, he reformulates Wetherell’s original motion, but accentuates the beneficial aspect of Gladstone’s actions. On 24 February, as the society met again to discuss the same topic, another amendment was moved by Pearson of Exeter College: “That Mr. Gladstone’s conduct in recognizing the necessity of a Liberal Government by joining the coalition has been eminently patriotic” (Pearson: OUS minute book vol. VIII, 24 February 1853). Here, too, the emphasis is on the benefit the country would receive from Gladstone’s conduct. The president adjourned the house due to disruption during one speech. In the following meeting, on 28 February, Hunt withdrew his amendment. A vote was then taken on Rogers’ amendment, as it had been presented following Hunt’s. The majority voted for it, which meant that all the other amendments and the original motion were never voted upon and, subsequently, considered lost. So it seems that the majority of the members present agreed with Rogers that, by joining his party together with the Whigs, Gladstone had acted contrary to his political ‘character’. Grainger (1969) has argued that it has been characteristic of English politics, in contrast to the American political system, that representatives were required to gain certain reputation before they could be entrusted with political office. That meant a show of skills, which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, was judged by performances in parliamentary debate (Grainger 1969, 15). Therefore, party political struggles became defining moments for gaining a reputation as a statesman. Here, the resolution of Oxford Union debate put Gladstone’s position into question.

Finally, the topos of expediency refers to action that is concerned with the solving of a practical problem. As was the case with ‘principle’, ‘expediency’ is mostly used to argue for or against some future action. The two are often used in the same formulations: “That while we condemn the Norman Invasion, as in principle unjust, with reference to its effects we must pronounce it highly beneficial” (OUS minute book vol. VI, 20 October 1842). This type of formulation was associated with the Sophists in particular: “Ought one to do what is expedient or what is just?” (Aristotle, On Sophistical Refutations, Sect. 2, Part 12) But the same also appears in Roman rhetorical literature. For example, in Cicero’s writings there appears a standard division between ‘honorable’ (‘honestum’) and ‘expedient’ (‘utile’) topics (Morstein-Marx 2004, 61). This suggests that the Union
Society debates had links to the rhetorical tradition followed by British parliamentary culture since Renaissance.

In some cases ‘principle’ and ‘expediency’ were not put as opposites, but used to rhetorically complement each other. This type of formulation was presented on 13 November 1851 in the Oxford Union Society when it debated: “That the French Revolution of 1789 was justifiable, and has conferred the greatest benefits on mankind” (OUS minute book vol. VII, 13 November 1851). Here the first part of the motion introduces the *topos* of principle and the latter conveys the one of expediency. By using the expression ‘greatest benefits’ it is implied that the French Revolution was conducted with good intentions and, therefore, may be considered ‘justifiable’. Thus the proposer uses the *topos* of principle not to contrast with, but to complement that of expediency.

An amendment to this was proposed: “That a Revolution was necessary in France, but that it is premature to pronounce definitely concerning the good effects resulting from it, in consequence of the excesses in which the Revolution terminated” (OUS minute book vol. VII, 13 November 1851). The amendment seems to be formulated in a way that only accentuates ‘expediency’. The rhetoric of necessity implies that the revolution was the only available means to change the situation prevailing in France, though a cautionary remark concerning the assessment is added. Another amendment was presented when the meeting was reconvened a week later: “That the French Revolution has conferred the greatest benefits on mankind” (OUS minute book vol. VII, 20 November 1851). Unlike the original motion, where ‘principle’ was used to support ‘expediency’, here it has been altogether abandoned. The formulation of the second amendment seems to suggest that the practical outcome of the revolution itself should be commended. In this way the rhetoric here emphasises ‘expediency’.

Whenever ‘expediency’ is the object of a debate the attention is on policy-making, the weighing of necessities and political consequences for future action. It is about persuading in terms of political circumstances, not just in the level of what is good or bad, but what seems to be necessary and therefore beneficial in a present context. In other words, the rhetoric of expediency in the formulation of motions in the Union Societies is evidence that they were deliberative assemblies with a strong interest in parliamentary politics.
Even though the topoi are not all-inclusive and may even overlap, they do indicate starting points for further analysis of how political agency was rhetorically conceived in the Union Societies. All of them belong to the field of deliberative rhetoric, but they represent different aspects of it. A ‘vote of confidence’ is evaluation of future action in terms of representation, and action based on ‘character’ is judged by the skills acquired by the actor and by the action itself. ‘Principle’ refers to the desirability of political activity on moral grounds, and ‘expediency’ on the basis of necessity or utility. The rhetorical topoi of expediency and principle can be found in classical rhetorical treatises (see e.g. Morstein-Marx 2004, Peltonen 2013). As discussed earlier, ‘principle’ is the classic rhetorical topos of morality as opposed to the political convenience that ‘expediency’ represents. These two topoi were systematically taught in early seventeenth century English schools. Schoolboys learned that the best arguments in deliberative rhetoric focused on the themes of honesty and utility (Peltonen 2013, 70). Peltonen’s study suggests that the pre-revolutionary English rhetorical education was not about merely repeating the classical instructions but about learning how to apply them to political and civil matters. The aim of this humanist schooling was to produce ‘leaders’ and ‘good Common-wealths men’ (ibid. 52).

The lack of oratorical practice in early nineteenth-century higher education was noted by Gladstone in his posthumously published essay on public speaking (1838). In his view the absence of rhetorical education in the British educational system at the time was both surprising and remarkable (in Reid 1953, 266). He argued that there should be ‘technical means of education’ for this ‘very first and most important employment of human life’. (ibid.) He further argued that a student of public speaking should particularly observe how oratory was practised in the House of Commons (ibid. 267). Gladstone’s advice supported the idea that political practice should be the basis of oratorical education. Moreover, he seems to have valued the art of eloquence. Gladstone’s own experiences in debating societies had started at Eton and continued in the Oxford Union. Many other members of the Unions had also received classical education in public schools. In the light of the analysis of the public debates classical

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9 It is worth noting that this evaluation is based on past experience which has to be conducted in the present. In that sense one might say that a ‘vote of confidence’ incorporates all time dimensions, the past, the present and the future.
rhetoric was in use in the Unions, even though the ‘technical means of education’ was lacking.

Conclusion

During the nineteenth-century the Union Societies became known as ‘training grounds’ for statesmen. They were formed at a time when the university education did not cover the kind of rhetorical training that had been available in the early modern period. Standard textbooks of rhetoric in pre-revolutionary grammar schools advised schoolboys how to make orations ‘for or against any legislative proposal’ (Peltonen 2013, 54). Despite the fact, it seems that, while having the connection with the parliamentary culture, the Union Societies are also part of the history of English humanism at the same time. By looking at the debating practices in use at Union Societies we can conclude that they had similar forms of deliberative rhetoric than was available in the early modern period. The parliamentary culture of debate preserved some of the humanist ideals of civic action in procedure and debating practices. As shown in Peltonen’s work (2013) the *topoi* of utility and honesty, which are comparable to expediency and principle, were taken from classical rhetorical advice books and used by schoolmasters and their students. This led to the awareness of deliberative rhetoric among the learned classes. Eventually political rhetoric appealing to people became embedded in the parliamentary practices.

There is a lot more to study on this transition but the debating practices of the Union Societies seem to suggest that there is enough to go on with the study of the elements of deliberative rhetoric in the present-day parliamentary democratic politics as well. I have only scratched the surface of the use of *topoi* of classical deliberative rhetoric in the Unions but I intend to take it further. I propose to construct a detailed categorisation of political activity in a parliamentary body. Although it is obvious that the forms of proceeding of the nineteenth-century Union Societies do not exist anywhere else as such, it does not change the fact that it is precisely because of the forms that also the politics of a parliamentary democracy today are considered legitimate. And, as shown in this paper, the forms of proceeding do preserve elements of the past that may prove helpful in further investigation of parliamentarism today.
References


