

One of the most important governmental bodies of antiquity was the Roman Senate. So powerful a council was it that the entire Roman State could be summed up in the letters S.P.Q.R., Senatus Populusque Romanus, The Senate and the Roman People (note - not the Senate of the Roman People).

It was the function of the Senate to pass decrees (decreta or consulta) which were, in theory, strong advice to the magistrates but came very close to being actual commands. After all one was a senator for life but held any given public office for a mere year.

Usually one of the two consuls acted as chairman and summoned the Senate to meet in any public place which was also consecrated. Meetings did not necessarily take place in the Curia, or Senate house proper, but, meeting in daylight only, the Fathers (Patres) would assemble in any temple in Rome. The first Senate meeting of the year was held on the Capitoline Hill in the great patriotic shrine of Jupiter. Caesar was murdered in a small temple attached to the Theatre of Pompey where the Senate had convened that fateful day in March of 44 B.C.

After the time of Sulla (c. 80 B.C.) the number of senators was increased from 300 to 600, a number which comes closer to resembling a modern parliament than something like the American Senate with its small 50 man membership. All the senators were, of course, aristocrats and within the senate were strictly ranked in a hierarchy of public office attainment. Men who had held the prestigious censorship (only 2 created every 5 years) were first, then ex-consuls, praetors, aediles, tribunes and the lowly quaestors, the back-benchers (20 a year - actually called pedarii - senators who express themselves with their feet only).

Normally the presiding consul would read off the matter to be discussed first (the relatio) and thence would put the question (interrogatio) to the Fathers asking that they give their opinion (sententia) in due order of rank. The Romans being great followers of influential men liked to know what the big shots thought about an issue first before making up their minds. The first to speak were the men elected to be consul for the coming year, then the ex-censors, ex-consuls, etc. on down the line. If you had nothing important to say a simple ita censeo (I agree with the preceding speaker) would do. The presiding officer could call a vote anytime, since only he controlled the agenda, without waiting for all 600 to speak, asking for a discessio, a

division of the house, in which you left your seat from which you addressed the house and walked over to stand with the man whose opinion you supported (thus the back-benchers were called mere foot-men, pedarii).

We know that back-benchers of unusual influence did in fact get a chance to speak. In 62 B.C., Cato the Younger, while only a paltry aedile, was afforded the right to debate with Julius Caesar, a praetor whose high office ranked just below the consulship, over the fate of men accused of treason to the state. Cato's point prevailed and the men were executed without trial.

Sometimes the Senate behaved with incredible good sense, other times with ill-concealed hysteria. On one occasion the Senate voted 370 for, 22 against a compromise which would have forestalled the civic war between Pompey and Caesar. The bill though passed with overwhelming support was blocked by a tribune's all-powerful veto. The infamous Final Decree of the Senate was a thinly veiled and not altogether legal decree which empowered the consuls to act in whatever fashion they thought best to protect the state - many a sacrosanct tribune was murdered under its notorious provisions. Of all the accomplishments of the Senate the fact that it survived the Republic to evolve into a prestigious but less-powerful Imperial Council must rank it as one of the great governmental bodies of all times.