

**‘WHERE HAVE ALL THE LEADERS GONE?’  
A Possible Reason for the Failure of the Sullan Senate**

**Bruce Marshall**

**(University of New England / Macquarie University / ASCS Honorary Secretary)**

Occasionally when you are reading on a topic you come across a suggestion which is so startlingly obvious that you wonder why you have never read of it before or thought of it yourself. One such moment occurred to me a few months ago when I was reading up on Julius Caesar for another purpose and came across this statement by Christian Meier when he was setting the background to Caesar’s career:

The picture presented by the [Sullan] Senate [in the 70s] was anything but imposing. The immense losses it had suffered in terms of biological and moral substance had become all too obvious. There were hardly any *principes*. In normal times the leadership of the house was in the hands of a group of twenty *consulares*. Only two had survived from the pre-Sullan period, and one of these, Lucius [Marcius] Philippus (the consul of 91) had died shortly after 75. The other (the consul of 92 [M. Perperna]) lived to be eighty-nine, but we do not know what help he could still give. . . . The truth was that two men, Quintus Lutatius Catulus (consul for 78) and Publius Servilius Isauricus (consul for 79) had to do what was formerly done by all the *principes*: they had to direct the business of the house and see to it that the Senate’s authority was upheld and its code of conduct observed. And they had to do this after the earlier discipline had been shattered by civil wars and proscriptions; they were faced for the most part with new members who had not risen gradually to prominence under the guidance of the *principes*, but were in many cases favourites of Sulla, and with a body whose membership had been increased from three hundred to six hundred. [Meier (1996) 112-13]

Ronald Syme had made the same point (with typical Symian succinctness):

Certain of the earliest consuls after Sulla were old men already, and some died soon or disappeared. Even in numbers there was a poor showing of consulars to guide public policy: only a few venerable relics, or recent consuls with birth but no weight. [Syme (1939) 22]

Jeff Tatum has a similar sentiment about the influence in the senate of consulars, but with a twist about the danger of too many old men (a sentiment with which I might not entirely agree!):

We tend to think of Roman society as a place where old age was venerated. and in a very real sense, it was. But it was also a society that was, by our standards, populated and managed by the young. To stand for the consulship, with very few exceptions, one had to be not less than 42 years of age – by definition an old man. But that only means that most magistrates, and most military officers, were men in their thirties. The bulk of the senate, then, will have comprised men in their thirties and forties. If one compares this to the relative gerontocracy of the American senate or most modern deliberative bodies, the contrast is nothing short of striking: the Roman senate was a boys’ club, in more ways than one. The ancient in Rome *were* venerated – because there were so few of them. . . .

And old men were dangerous. The perpetuation of the Roman oligarchy, to some degree, required timely departures by its most eminent members. A talented senator commenced his public career in his late twenties. Service, glory and honor supervened. At the earliest, he was elevated to the consulship in his early forties, after which he was entitled to a provincial command and his final meed of greatness. Thereafter, he was a prince of the state, an honorable personage whose opinion must be asked and must be respected. By then, however, the clock was ticking, and demographic forces soon removed him before he could try the patience of his colleagues – or find the energy or restlessness to re-enter the competition for the very finite quantities of prestige and power that existed. The regular and reliable death of ex-consuls was an important safety valve in the pressurized world of the Roman senate. . . . It wasn’t decadence or luxury or social evils that brought the republic to its knees: it was grumpy old men. [Tatum (2008) 147-48]

Which of the consuls from, say, the early 80s and on into the 70s were actually left who might take a leadership role the senate in the way that Meier suggests they should have? Perhaps we could look at each of the pairs of consuls in turn and comment on those still alive:<sup>1</sup>

87 Cn. Octavius

He expelled his colleague Cinna from Rome, but when the latter joined forces with the exiled Marius and together with him took control of the city, he was killed.

L. Cornelius Cinna

Following his capture of the city with Marius, a reign of terror was conducted and many opponents of Marius were killed. Cinna went on to take control of Rome for the next four years, during which he held the consulship continuously.

87 L. Cornelius Merula (consul suffectus)

Elected as colleague of Octavius when he expelled Cinna from Rome; he committed suicide when the Marians captured the city.

86 L. Cornelius Cinna

Consul for the second time.

C. Marius

Marius held his prophesied seventh consulship but died shortly after entering office.

86 L. Valerius Flaccus (consul suffectus)

Elected to replace Marius, he also succeeded him in the command against Mithridates, but was killed in a mutiny of his troops led by his legate C. Flavius Fimbria.

85 L. Cornelius Cinna

Consul for the third time.

Cn. Papirius Carbo

Both consuls began preparations for the likely return of Sulla from the East.

84 L. Cornelius Cinna

Cinna was killed by mutinous troops early in the year as he was preparing to cross to Epirus. By occupying one of the consulships for four years, Cinna prevented other candidates from securing consular status.

Cn. Papirius Carbo

Carbo carried on as sole consul for the rest of the year, continuing Cinna's preparations against the return of Sulla.

83 L. Cornelius Scipio Asiaticus

Sulla, by now returned, won Scipio's army away from him and took him prisoner, but dismissed him unharmed. He was later proscribed but escaped to Massilia.

C. Norbanus

Norbanus was defeated near Mt Tifata in Campania and retreated to Capua where he held out for a while. He escaped into exile and only escaped the clutches of the proscription executioners by taking his own life.

82 Cn. Papirius Carbo

After a series of military reverses at the hands of Sullan supporters, Carbo deserted his army and fled to Africa; he was captured when trying to join Marian forces in Sicily and put to death by the young Pompeius, the *adulescentulus carnifex*. Like Cinna, by holding multiple consulships Carbo had blocked others from achieving that status.

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare this detail with the table on p. 7 below.

## C. Marius (the Younger)

Marius, only 26 when elected consul, was defeated by Sulla and besieged in Praeneste for a long time; he was killed while trying to escape from there.

## 81 M. Tullius Decula

This was the year when Sulla became dictator; his *magister equitum* was the aged L. Valerius Flaccus (cos. 100), an old man if ever there was one. Nothing more is known of Decula following this consulship – and not much of Flaccus for that matter.

## Cn. Cornelius Dolabella

Following his consulship Dolabella went off to the governorship of Macedonia until 77, when he returned to celebrate a triumph – and prosecution by the young Julius Caesar in which he was acquitted. Meier suggests that these two consuls were Sulla's creatures – 'faithful followers and political nonentities'.

## 80 L. Cornelius Sulla Felix

After resigning his unusual dictatorship, Sulla took the consulship this year. He was unhappy with the results of the consular elections for 78 but did nothing about it. He died the following year.

## Q. Caecilius Metellus Pius

One of those anti-Marians who fled from Rome during the regime of Cinna, he joined Sulla with a private army in 83 and was his colleague in this consulship. He was then sent to Spain to deal with Marian remnants under Sertorius – unsuccessfully until he was joined by Pompeius in 77. He returned to Rome in 71, celebrated a triumph and lived in retirement until his death about 63 (probably aged in his early fifties à la Tatum). He was absent therefore for most of the decade of the 70s. There is only one mention of his involvement in political affairs in the 60s after his return: in 65 he co-operated with Hortensius, Catulus and Marcus Lucullus in the prosecution of the *popularis* tribune Cornelius (Ascon. 60.20-21).

## 79 P. Servilius Vatia (Isauricus)

Blocked by the disturbances of the 80s from advancing to the consulship, having been praetor in 90 and a consular candidate for 88, Vatia was Sulla's choice for the consulship of 79. He was given a proconsular command in Cilicia, where he operated successfully for several years, ending in the reduction in 75 of the Isaurians on the northern slopes of the Taurus range (for which he took the *cognomen* Isauricus). He continued to take a lead in political affairs, for example, supporting Pompeius' appointment to the Eastern command in 66, opposing the triumvirate in 59, appearing for the defence in the trial of M. Scaurus in 54, and holding the censorship in 55.

## Ap. Claudius Pulcher

An enemy of Cinna, he left Rome in 87, was outlawed and struck off the senate roll. He returned with Sulla and became consul in this year. He was assigned the province of Macedonia where he won some victories despite illness. He died in 76, leaving three sons and three daughters in straitened circumstances.

## 78 M. Aemilius Lepidus

Thwarted by the opposition of his consular colleague Catulus and of the *optimates* to his proposal to overthrow some of the Sullan legislation, Lepidus began an insurrection. Although he had supported his consular candidature, in 77 Pompeius turned against Lepidus, accepting a special grant of *imperium* to combat him and his supporters. Lepidus was eventually defeated in Italy and fled to Sardinia where he was killed in 77.

## Q. Lutatius Catulus

One of the few to survive from the Sullan period, and considered to be an upholder of the Sullan senatorial dominance. The succinct Syme sums him up thus:

‘The virtue and integrity of Catulus, rare in that age, earned general recognition: brilliance and vigour were lacking.’ [Syme (1939) 21]

Catulus belonged to a consular family – his father had been consul in 102 and was executed by the Marians, which is sufficient to explain the son’s pro-Sullan stance. Cicero was a constant admirer – and that ought to make us wary. In the year after his consulship Catulus had to contend with the insurrection of Lepidus, but as confidence was lacking in his military abilities, he was thought to need the support of other commanders like Pompeius. In the mid-70s Catulus as a senior consular led the opposition to attempts to overthrow the Sullan restrictions on the tribunate, but towards the end of that decade he realised that opposition was no longer viable, and the law of Pompeius and Crassus in 70 about restoring the tribunes’ powers was passed. Catulus played a prominent role in senatorial politics in the 60s (for example, in opposing the extensive extra-ordinary commands proposed for Pompeius in 67 and 66); in 65 he was elected censor, but spent his term of office at loggerheads with his colleague Crassus. The rising young Caesar criticised him in 63 over his 15-year delay in restoring the temple of Capitoline Jupiter, not without hinting at misappropriation – retaliation perhaps for Catulus’ naming of him as a possible Catilinarian conspirator? And then, surprisingly and as the result of heavy bribery, Caesar defeated him though he was the more senior candidate in the election to the position of pontifex maximus in 63. Catulus died in 61 or 60.

How many then were left standing? Of the 22 consulships I have listed in this ten-year period from 87 to 78 (there were two *suffecti*), four were held on multiple occasions by Cinna and Carbo, thus blocking others from gaining access to the office; nine were killed in civil warfare; four died in office, fled into exile during the civil disturbances or were otherwise dead by the mid-70s. That leaves five standing, a far smaller proportion of living consulars than in the heyday of senatorial control of the state in the 2nd c. BC. And of those five a couple were non-entities: Decula and Dolabella, the consuls of 81 – Sullan creatures perhaps. And, of course, some consuls would be away from Rome at any one time on military service. That leaves just three to carry the burden of setting a senatorial example: Metellus Pius (away, however, for almost the whole decade of the 70s campaigning against Sertorius in Spain), Vatia Isauricus (away from 78-75), and Catulus therefore just about carrying the burden on his own.

The failure of the Sullan senate in the 70s is the subject of regular comment in the sources. As part of his reactionary reform program, Sulla had bolstered the senate with the addition of new members and transferred control of the jury-courts from the equites back to the senators, along with a regularisation of the courts themselves. One question to ask is – where did Sulla get his new senators from? There are two versions of the sort of people whom Sulla adlected to the new senate: Sallust, a hardy *popularis*, accuses Sulla of admitting *gregarii milites* (*Cat.* 37.6)<sup>2</sup>, and Dionysius (5.77) agrees with him. The other version, given by Livy (*per.* 89)<sup>3</sup> and

<sup>2</sup> Sall. *Cat.* 37.6: *deinde multi memores Sullanae victoriae, quod ex gregariis militibus alios senatores videbant, alios ita divites ut regio victu atque cultu aetatem agerent, sibi quisque, si in armis foret, ex victoria talia sperabat.* ‘Many also, recalling Sulla’s victory when they saw common soldiers rising to the rank of senators, and others becoming so rich that they feasted and lived like kings, then they too hoped, each one for himself, to reap similar fruits from the victory.’

<sup>3</sup> Livy *Per.* 89: *Sulla ... legibus novis rei publicae statum confirmavit, tribunorum plebis potestatem minuit et omne ius legum ferendarum ademit ... senatum ex equestri ordine supplevit ...* ‘Sulla ... strengthened the

Appian (*BC* 1.100)<sup>4</sup> is that the 300 new members came from the *ordo equester*. Since Sulla was trying to restore the senate to a position of authority, he would hardly have ‘allowed it to be polluted by the addition of unworthy members.’<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is known that Sulla was opposed to, and by, the middle class, and so it is unlikely that he would have included members from it in the new senate; in fact, he executed large numbers of them, 2600 according to Appian. But if we realise that in the middle class were included the genuine equites who belonged really to senatorial families, that is the ambitious young men who were waiting to start on their political careers and doing their preliminary military training, no longer in the cavalry, but in the junior officer ranks. Appian uses terms which point out the distinction between the two sorts of members of the *ordo equester*: when referring generally to the ‘middle class’ he uses οἱ καλούμενοι (e.g. *BC* 1.103)<sup>6</sup>, but when referring to the ‘real’ equites he uses οἱ ἄριστοι ἱππεῖς (e.g. *BC* 1.100 already quoted above). He uses the latter term when describing Sulla’s increase in the senate’s membership. So it would seem that Sulla filled up the senate mainly with those who came from an aristocratic background and whose allegiance was secured to him through gratitude for their promotion.

A typical comment on the failure of the senators to act properly in their role as jurors in the courts is this passage from Cicero, addressing the jury in the trial of Verres in 70 (*Cic. Verr.* 1.43-44):

*cui loco, per deos immortales, iudices, consulite ac providete. moneo praedicoque id quod intellego, tempus hoc vobis divinitus datum esse ut odio, invidia, infamia, turpitudine totum ordinem liberetis. nulla in iudiciis severitas, nulla religio, nulla denique iam existimantur esse iudicia. itaque a populo Romano contemnimur, despiciuntur: gravi diuturnaue iam flagramus infamia. [44] neque enim ullam aliam ob causam populus Romanus tribuniciam potestatem tanto studio requisivit; quam cum poscebat, verbo illam poscere videbatur, re vera iudicia poscebat. neque hoc Quintum Catulum, hominem sapientissimum atque amplissimum, fugit, qui Cnaeo Pompeio, viro fortissimo et clarissimo, de tribunicia potestate referente cum esset sententiam rogatus, hoc initio est summa cum auctoritate usus, patres conscriptos iudicia male et flagitiose tueri; quodsi in rebus iudicandis populi Romani existimationi satis facere voluissent, non tanto opere homines fuisse tribuniciam potestatem desideraturos.*

Now I entreat you, gentlemen of the jury, in the name of the gods, to take thought and to take steps to meet this situation. I warn you and solemnly remind you of what is clear to me, that heaven itself has given you this opportunity to deliver our whole order from hatred, unpopularity, dishonour and disgrace. People reckon that in our courts of law there is no strictness, no conscience, indeed no worth any more. The result is that we are condemned and despised by the Roman people. We have been groaning under a heavy and long-term load of infamy. It is for this reason, and no other, that the Roman people have been calling with such a strong desire for [the restoration of] the tribunician power. Their demand for that seemed to be for the thing itself, but their real demand was for honest courts. This fact was not missed by that wise and eminent man, Quintus Catulus; when the brave and distinguished general, Cnaeus Pompeius, proposed his measure about the tribunician power and Catulus was asked for his opinion, he began his speech with a most impressive declaration that the conscript fathers were proving ineffective and immoral guardians of the courts and that, if only they had chosen in their capacity as jurors to have acted properly in the estimation of the Roman people, men would not have felt so acutely the loss of the tribunes’ powers.

---

constitution by new laws, diminished the power of the tribunes of the people and took away from them their right to introduce legislation ... and he filled up the senate from the equestrian order ...’

<sup>4</sup> Appian *BC* 1.100: αὐτῇ δὲ τῇ βουλῇ διὰ τὰς στάσεις καὶ τοὺς πολέμους πάμπαν ὀλιγανδρούση προσκατέλεξεν ἀμφὶ τοὺς τριακοσίους ἐκ τῶν ἀρίστων ἱππέων, ταῖς φυλαῖς ἀναδοὺς ψῆφον περὶ ἑκάστου. ‘To the senate itself, which had been considerably depleted by civil disruption and wars, he added about 300 members from the best of the equites, taking a vote of the tribes on each one.’

<sup>5</sup> Hill (1932) 171; cf. Syme (1939) 78.

<sup>6</sup> Appian *BC* 1.103: ... καὶ παράδοξον, οἷον οὐπω τι ἕτερον, τὸ μὴ δεῖσαι νεότητος ἐν τῷδε τῷ πολέμῳ πλέον μυριάδων δέκα ἀνηρημένης καὶ τῶν ἐχθρῶν αὐτὸν ἀνελόντα βουλευτὰς μὲν ἐνενήκοντα, ὑπάτος δ’ ἐς πεντεκαίδεκα, ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν καλούμενων ἱππέων δισχιλίους καὶ ἑξακοσίους σὺν τοῖς ἐξεληλαμένοις ... ‘Paradoxical beyond anything is the fact that he was afraid of nothing [after voluntarily resigning his dictatorship], more than 100,000 young men had perished in this war, and of his enemies he had destroyed 90 senators, 15 men of consular rank, and 2,600 of the so-called equites, along with those who were proscribed.’

There had been some notorious examples of senatorial corruption on jury service. In the trial of Staius Albius Oppianicus in 74 for murder by attempted poisoning, one of the jurors, Paetus Staienus, though he voted for condemnation, was said by Cicero (*Verr.* 1.39) to have accepted bribes from both the defence *and* the prosecution. C. Herennius was condemned in a trial between 74 and 70 for accepting bribes in a court case (*Cic. Verr.* 1.39). There were charges of bribery and improperly coloured voting tablets in the trial of Terentius Varro in 74 for misconduct as governor of Asia in 77 (he was acquitted). Provincial governors became even more rapacious in their provinces – witness the deeds of Verres – no doubt thinking that that they would be acquitted by juries made up of their fellow-senators who, they assumed, would want to collect the same ill-gotten gains when they became governors themselves. That was not always the case – there were some condemnations: e.g. P. Gabinius sometime between 76 and 70 for extortion while governor of Achaëa (*Cic. div. Caec.* 64; *Arch.* 9). But in general in this decade bribery and corruption was rife, and governors got off.

One view put forward is that the new senators, less conscious of their responsibilities, were led to accepting bribes in order to maintain their incomes and keep up with the demands of senatorial status. There was increasing competition for election to office and canvassing cost more and more money. But the senate may also have been approaching its use-by date. The war lords were taking over and a new paradigm was being introduced: Marius' army reforms had created volunteer legions loyal to their commander, and Sulla's own example had created the precedent whereby an army commander at the head of his loyal legions could coerce the state. Pompeius had written to the senate in 74 saying that, if he did not get the reinforcements he need to complete the campaign against Sertorius in Spain, he would have to 'return to Italy' – those words had a threatening force to those who could remember what Sulla had done. And when he did defeat Sertorius and return to Rome in 71, he camped his army outside the city and asked the senate for the consulship of 70, though he was six years too young and had held none of the offices in the *cursus honorum*. When reminded by the senators of these disqualifications, he quietly reminded them that his army was still outside Rome. The senate, powerless in the face of a successful and determined military commander, acquiesced. There is more to it than just senatorial corruption and incompetence or lack of a sufficient number of leaders.

## REFERENCES

- Hill, H. (1932). 'Sulla's New Senators in 81 B.C.', *CQ* 26: 170-77.  
 Meier, C. (1996). *Caesar* (translated from the German by David McLintock). London: Fontana.  
 Syme, R. (1939). *The Roman Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.  
 Tatum, W. Jeffrey (2008). *Always I am Caesar*. Malden MA: Blackwell.

*See following page for illustrative table.*

**TABLE: to illustrate ‘A Possible Reason for the Failure of the Sullan Senate’**

Year	Consuls	Dead or Alive	70s	60s
87	Cn. Octavius L. Cornelius Cinna L. Cornelius Merula (cos. suff.)	Killed when opposing Cinna and Marius Went on to control Rome for next four years Suicided when Marians captured the city	— — —	— — —
86	L. Cornelius Cinna (cos. II) C. Marius (cos. VII) L. Valerius Flaccus (cos. suff.)	Still in control of Rome Died soon after entering office Killed in a mutiny of his troops in Asia	— — —	— — —
85	L. Cornelius Cinna (cos. III) Cn. Papirius Carbo	Still in control of Rome With Cinna prepared for return of Sulla	— —	— —
84	L. Cornelius Cinna (cos. IV) Cn. Papirius Carbo (cos. II)	Killed in a mutiny of troops crossing to Epirus Sole consul after Cinna’s death	— —	— —
83	L. Cornelius Scipio Asiaticus C. Norbanus	Lost his army to Sulla; proscribed but fled to Massilia Escaped from siege at Capua, but then suicided	— —	— —
82	Cn. Papirius Carbo (cos. III) C. Marius (the Younger)	Defeated by Sullans; fled to Africa; killed there by Pompeius Besieged in Praeneste by Sullans; killed trying to escape	— —	— —
81	M. Tullius Decula Cn. Cornelius Dolabella	Nothing more known of him after consulship Governor of Macedonia till 77; no more is heard of him	? Part?	? ?
80	L. Cornelius Sulla Felix (cos. II) Q. Caecilius Metellus Pius	Resigned dictatorship to take this office; died following year Joined Sulla in 83; sent to Spain to deal with Sertorius in 70s	— —	— Yes
79	P. Servilius Vatia (Isauricus) Ap. Claudius Pulcher	Proconsular command in Cilicia until 75 Proconsular command in Macedonia; died in 76	Part —	Yes —
78	M. Aemilius Lepidus Q. Lutatius Catulus	Started an insurrection; killed in Sardinia in 77 Operated against Lepidus’ insurrection	— Yes	— Yes