



### Cicero on the *Princeps* or Leading Citizen

The *princeps* is the one who “takes or captures first place” by a popular acclaim arising from trust and proven service. The Latin word comes from *primus* (first) and *-ceps* (a form of *capio*, *capere*, to capture). See Cicero’s *On Duties* especially. In English, “leading citizen” expresses Cicero’s rich meaning sufficiently well.

**The Education and Character of Leading Citizens:** Thoroughly educated and well versed in law, leading citizens are experts in effective communication, prudent planning, and principled governance. They are the ones who, Cicero argues, “have better insight into the future, and who, when an emergency arises and a crisis comes, can clear away the difficulties and reach a safe decision according to the exigencies of the occasion” (*On Duties* 2.33). In Cicero’s eloquent account, such talented and skilled artisans are the only ones able to persuade and teach others in order to form societies:

Those who stood out as first in virtue and outstanding in counsel, having perceived the essential teachableness of human nature, gathered together into one place those who had been scattered abroad, and brought them from the state of savagery to one of justice and humanity. (*Pro Sestio* 91; see also *De inventione* 1.1-3, *De oratore* 1.30-33, *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.62-63)

Here and elsewhere, Cicero shows that it takes an expertise of the “great and wise” to bring about peace and prosperity (*De inventione* 1.2; *De oratore* 1.30), an expertise rooted in the *studia humanitatis*, the thorough-going study of humanity and civility (see below). This extensive education is, for Cicero, the best way to cultivate justice, liberty, and peace. To be a leading citizen, a person must freely take on a demanding education and arduous training to achieve the highest excellence – just as the greatest sportsmen, doctors, or other experts do in their specialties.

**Leading Citizens and the Rule of Law:** To achieve a true “common-wealth” for their fellow citizens, leading citizens have to learn such things as *how* to achieve peace and prosperity and *how* to preserve their own integrity in the difficult task of enabling justice [*ius*] to conquer violence [*vis*]. To do so, leading citizens must pay special attention to the laws developed through their country’s history, but view them from a truly philosophic perspective.

The rule of law has special importance because without law – and without the courts and other constitutional means to enforce them – *ius* (justice) cannot conquer *vis* (violence). Cicero “repeatedly stressed that a state is a partnership in justice, a community held together by a common agreement about the principles of right that ... must be spelled out in a state’s laws, whose purpose it is to ensure that citizens may live honorably and happily in safety and peace” (Mitchell’s *Cicero*, Yale UP, 1991, 51). In what may be his most famous lines about law, Cicero insisted that:

[L]aw is the bond by which we secure our dignity, the foundation of our liberty, the fountain-head of justice. Within the law are reposed the mind and spirit, the judgment and the conviction of the state. The state without law would be like the human body without mind – unable to employ the parts which are to it as sinews, blood, and limbs. The magistrates who administer the law, the jurors who interpret it – all of us in short – obey the law that we might be free. (*Pro Cluentio* 146)

Here Cicero uses the metaphor of the human body to explain the workings of the body politic: just as the mind facilitates the free movement of the body, so the laws facilitate the free movement of the body politic.

**Leading Citizens as Governors:** According to Cicero, leading citizens are experts at captaining or “governing” (*gubernans*) the ship of state:

But just as in sailing, it shows nautical skill to run before the wind in a gale, even if you fail thereby to make your port; whereas when you can get there just as well by slanting your tacking, it is sheer folly to court disaster by keeping your original course, rather than change it and still reach your destination; on the same principle in the conduct of state affairs, while we should all have as our one aim and object what I have so repeatedly urged – the maintenance of peace with dignity – it does not follow that we ought always to express ourselves in the same way, though we ought always to have in view the same goal. (*Epis. Fam.* 1.21)

Consider More’s famous advice in *Utopia*: “Don’t give up the ship in the storm because you cannot govern the winds.”

**Erasmus and More on *princeps*:** Erasmus defines the *princeps* as the “embodiment of the laws,” a leader ideally selected by the vote of a free people. Erasmus commented that the custom of having a *princeps* “born to the office, not elected was the custom of some barbarian peoples in the past (according to Aristotle) and is also the practice almost everywhere in our own time” (*Education of a Christian Prince*, Cambridge UP 1997, 6). More also uses this key term in *Utopia*.

(over)

## Cicero on *Humanitas*

Cicero uses the term *humanitas* to express the idea of a fully mature human being.<sup>1</sup> Cicero affirms<sup>2</sup> that leading citizens need a full and complete education in *studia humanitatis* -- that “wide domain of science” not “split up into separate departments” (*De oratore* 3.132). Otherwise, leaders come “to office and to positions in the government quite naked and unarmed, not equipped with any acquaintance with affairs or knowledge” (3.136). Only such a well-educated leader can “win freedom for his native land,” having been “equipped...with weapons for the task” (3.139). The dangers of a partial education are seen by two extremes: those Cynics and Stoics who “in the Socratic discourse had been captivated chiefly by the ideal of endurance and hardness”; and those Epicureans “who had taken delight rather in the Socratic discussions on the subject of pleasure” (3.62). Cicero’s approach fosters a humane civility of character and aims at nothing less than forming a complete, mature and fully capable human being.<sup>3</sup>

“Law or violence,” *ius* or *vis*, peace or war, *humanitas* or savagery – these were the fundamental alternatives (*Pro Sestio*, esp. 91-92). For Cicero, the landmark that should guide citizens and “leading citizens” was this:

What then is the mark set before those who guide the helm of state, upon which they ought to keep their eyes and towards which they ought to direct their course? It is that which is far the best and the most desirable for all who are sound and good and prosperous; it is “peace with *dignitas*.”<sup>4</sup> (*Pro Sestio* 98)

*Humanitas* achieves its full civil flourishing when governed by those guidelines or laws arising from the very structure of its being, just as with the arts of farming, doctoring, and navigation.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the “most fruitful of all arts,” for Cicero, is the “true and refined philosophy” that teaches the way of good living.<sup>6</sup> Thomas More held this same position from his earliest published work.<sup>7</sup>

Cicero repeatedly insisted that true *humanitas* requires one to have a certain “contempt” for passing human things (*humanarum rerum contemptio*) -- especially pleasure -- if one is to achieve truth, the common good, and “greatness of soul.”<sup>8</sup> He explained, as he had done “so often,” that such principled “contempt” is a necessity especially for statesmen:

Statesmen, too, no less than philosophers -- perhaps even more so -- should carry with them that greatness of spirit [*magnificentia*]<sup>9</sup> and indifference to outward circumstances [*despicientia rerum humanarum*] to which I so often refer, together with calm of soul and freedom from care, if they are to be free from worries and lead a dignified and self-consistent life.” (*De officiis* 1.72)

**Thomas More and Cicero:** For further study of More’s use of terms like *humanitas* and *princeps*, consult the Latin concordances on [essentialmore.org](http://essentialmore.org) and the study guide on key Ciceronian terms in *Utopia*.

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Mitchell, *Cicero: The Ascending Years* (Yale UP, 1979), 198-200.

<sup>2</sup> See also Cicero’s own comments in the Prefaces to each day of his Crassus dialogues, esp. *De oratore* 1.5 & 16, 2.5-6, and 3.15.

<sup>3</sup> See *Pro Archia* 2-4, 14-16, *De oratore* 1.53-54; see also Seneca, Letter 65.7.

<sup>4</sup> We have no adequate translation of *dignitas*. Cicero identifies it with *honestas*, i.e., a human being’s distinctive moral excellence; see esp. *De officiis* 1.94-99, 106 and 1.124 that present the duty of magistrate and citizen as working for *tranquillitas et honestas* and which emphasizes upholding the state’s *dignitas*, enforcing laws and rights, and living up to *fides*.

<sup>5</sup> *De finibus* 4.16-17.

<sup>6</sup> *Tusculanae disputationes* 4.5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *EW* 269-270, 288-290, and More’s humanist letters (*EW* 389ff). See also his introduction to Pico della Mirandola’s “Letter to Andrew Cornueus,” where, contrary to Pico’s opinion, More states that one reason to study philosophy is “for the instruction of [the] mind in moral virtue” (*EW* 77/84-85).

<sup>8</sup> *De officiis* 1.13; in these contexts, *res humane* is often translated as “human vicissitudes” or “worldly conditions.” In the “Dream of Scipio” (Cicero’s *Republic* 6.20), the command is to “keep your gaze fixed upon these heavenly things, and scorn the earthly”; the dream allows Scipio to see “what a small portion ... belongs to you Romans” (6.21).

<sup>9</sup> Compare this use with *EW* 211/24-5, Morus’s famously controversial invocation of *nobilitas*, *magnificentia*, *splendor*, *maiestas*.