

**Bedales School, Hampshire**  
**Headmaster Keith Budge says a liberal arts curriculum is a good foundation for learning how to debate**

Should you find yourself listening to an episode of *Just a Minute* (BBC Radio 4) on which the broadcaster Gyles Brandreth is a guest, you may well wonder at his ability to say so much about so little for so long, and in such an entertaining way.

What you are listening to is the fruit of a tradition of liberal arts education that stretches back for millennia, and can be found alive and well today at Bedales, where Brandreth was a student.

**Skills for life**

The liberal arts education tradition has long roots. In the classical context, the focus was on the subjects and skills deemed essential if one was to take an active part in civic life – for example, public debate. Essential to a classical education were the disciplines of grammar, logic and rhetoric – the art of speaking persuasively.

Cicero, the Roman lawyer, philosopher and politician, was famed for his rhetoric. He believed that the ability to speak well was the very basis of civilisation, and was inextricably bound up with the development of a virtuous character.

**A love for learning**

Nowadays, a liberal arts school education is a relatively rare beast, although Bedales is devoted to such an offering. Through an arts and humanities-heavy curriculum, we seek to develop inquisitive, creative and critical thinkers who cherish independent thought. We celebrate individuality, although this is tempered by a strong focus on mutual obligation and civic responsibilities.

And this approach is not to any detriment for our scientists – quite



**“Cicero believed that the ability to speak well was the very basis of civilisation”**

the contrary, with many of them adopting a hybrid approach to their subject choices, combining the scientific with what are seen as more creative disciplines.

Of course, any effective contribution to public life requires the exercise of rhetorical skills, and Bedales

encourages both public speaking and debating, and enters teams into debating competitions with success.

A recent in-house school debate saw two sixth formers join with two external experts (one of whom was a former Bedales student then chief executive of UK Trade & Investment) for a powerful debate on the European Union.

**Public Service**

Students can take advantage of our



Top, Baroness Chakrabarti on a visit to the school, above, the broadcaster David Dimbleby on the *Question Time* set, left, Cicero

weekly evening lectures at school, which have seen presentations from former heads of MI6, TV producers and novelists.

Bedales can claim a real influence on British public life through contributions to politics and public service. In 1934, Bedales founder, John Haden Badley, was invited to 10 Downing Street to discuss his educational thinking with Ramsey Macdonald (himself a Bedales parent).

More recently, many of our students who go on to work in the public and third sectors have included current MP Rebecca Harris, recently retired Minister Jeremy Browne and, to end with a suitably rhetorical flourish (though at the risk of “repetition”), one Gyles Brandreth. We like to think that Cicero might have approved.

