

POLITICS AS AN ART

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Here is my thesis. The business of politics is of supreme importance. Politics is both a fine art and an inexact science. We have concentrated upon its scientific aspects – the measurement and estimation of economic trends, the organization of finance, the devising of plans for social security, the discovery of *what* to do. We have neglected it as an art, the delineating and practice of *how* and *when* to do these things and above all, how to persuade a self-governing people to accept and loyally observe them. This neglect is of crucial importance, for I am prepared to assert that it is only if the art of politics succeeds that the science of politics will be efficiently studied and mastered.

In short, the art is no less important than the science. In these days this sounds like a paradox. But it should not surprise any student of twentieth-century history, for history is a tragic story of how science (which so easily becomes an instrument of hatred and destruction) has outrun the art of living, to the singular discomfort and confusion and almost to the ruin of mankind.

As one who has for twenty years been engaged in political work in his own country, I have been continually surprised and dejected at the indifference to politics shown by so many thousands of active, intelligent and well-informed men and women. Their spoken attitude is either one of contempt for ‘politicians’ and all their works, or one of indifference. ‘I am much too busy to bother about politics.’ Yet, not only all the major economic conditions of their ordinary lives, but also all the great factors which determine peace or war, international co-operation or conflict, are the creatures of politics and of political action. To despise or ignore them is therefore a sort of suicidal folly.

Such attitudes are the evidence, not of a superior intelligence, but of a defective sensibility and imagination. Tariffs, taxes, plans of national development, the proportion which exists or should exist between the administrative and the productive groups, the facilitation and control of transport, monetary policies, services of health, the provision and conditioning of social benefits and industrial security, these and a hundred other great elements are the product of the applied science of politics.

In the daily life of the plain citizen there is scarcely one hour or one activity which is unaffected by what the politicians in Congress or Parliament determine. Even those who seek to diminish the activities of government and believe that we are passing too readily from the productive to the paternal and perhaps to the authoritarian state cannot reduce the area of political action except by the use of political action.

That, briefly stated, is why I believe that politics is the most important and responsible civil activity to which a man may devote his character, his talents, and his energy. We must, in our own interests, elevate politics into statesmanship and statecraft. We must aim at a condition of affairs in which we shall no longer reserve the dignified name of statesman for a Churchill or a Roosevelt, but extend it to lesser men who give honourable and patriotic service in public affairs.

It is true that most men of ability prefer the objective work of science, the law, literature, scholarship, or the immediately stimulating and profitable work of manufacturing, commerce, or finance.

The result is that our legislative assemblies are a fair popular cross-section, not a *corps d'elite*. The first-class mind is comparatively rare. We discourage young men of parts by confronting them with poor material rewards, precariousness of tenure, an open public cynicism about their motives, and cheap sneers about their real or supposed search for publicity.

The reason for this wrong-headedness, so damaging to ourselves, is that we have treated democracy as an *end* and not as a *means*. It is almost as if we had said, when legislatures freely elected by the votes of all adult citizens came into being, 'Well, thank heaven we have achieved democracy. Let us now devote our attention to something new.' Yet the true task of the democrat only begins when he is put in possession of the instruments by which the popular will may be translated into authoritative action. In brief, we cannot sensibly devote only one per cent of our time to something which affects ninety-nine per cent of our living.

How, then, are we to attract into the political service of the nation more and more people of unusual gifts? Not merely by the attraction of the scientific aspect of politics, for science must be in its nature objective. It concerns itself with the absolute truth, not with the best realizable compromise. The pure political scientist would die of frustration after a year or two spent in public affairs. The real attraction must be that of the art of politics, through which alone the political scientist will get his chance, and by which alone the results of his labours will, in greater or lesser degree, be put into operation.

What is the art of politics? As one of its most indifferent practitioners, I hesitate to answer that question. In any event no answer can be exhaustive. I shall therefore put my answer in several ways.

First, briefly, the art of politics is, in relation to public affairs, to provide exposition, persuasion, and inspiration. As the answer has a sort of echo in it of the more tedious forms of after-dinner oratory I make my second.

It is that the art of politics embraces all the following elements:

By speech or writing or both to convey political ideas to others. (You might, in fact, say 'to others and to yourself', for many a speaker or writer has for the first time clarified his own mind in the course of endeavouring to convey his ideas to others. This is a phenomenon well known to many advocates and even to some judges!)

To secure the acceptance of those ideas by a majority.

To create a firm and understanding public opinion which will see that they are translated into action.

To accustom people to thinking, not only of the immediate present or of the next election, but of the future of a long-range and comprehensive way.

To temper the frequently absurd asperities of political conflict by seeking to stir up only noble and humane emotions, since ignoble passions, so easily aroused, can in the nature of things produce only ignoble policies and unfair administration.

Above all – for it is the only element which can make the magnificent conception of democracy result in the birth of true and brotherly human freedom – to encourage a wide

realization that every right connotes a duty; that my rights are conditioned upon some other fellow's performance of his duty to me, and that his rights will disappear unless I do my duty by him.

By way of third answer, let me now make a few practical working comments upon some of these elements.

We are no doubt fine fellow, but on the whole we are neglecting the art of speech. There are plenty of speakers and much willingness. But on public occasions, great or small, there is a growing disposition to read an essay and to read it in a singularly dull way, with head bowed over the typescript, without pause or emphasis, or point or climax. If we are satisfied that our speeches are going to be eagerly read by posterity, this may be a good idea. But for most of us the essence of a speech is that it should reach the hearts and minds of our immediate audience. It must therefore be made *to* them and not merely in their presence.

The frequent and indiscriminating praise of that rather misunderstood thing called 'oratory' has, I sometimes think, tended adversely to affect the quality of public speech. After all, the essence of a good speech is that the speaker should have something to say which he is resolved to convey to his listeners in the simplest, most intelligible, and most persuasive language. He must command his own words and not become their incoherent victim. The search for elaboration rather than simplicity is a mark of the second-rate. Lucidity has always seemed to me to be one of the cardinal virtues. The occasional passages of noble and moving English which have flowered in the speeches of a Pitt, a Lincoln, a Churchill, were the inevitable produce of sincerity, originality of mind, and deep emotion. They cannot be forced without being destroyed. They certainly cannot be consciously imitated.

Two modern devices are, in my opinion, acting adversely to good public speech. One is amplification by the microphone. Sometimes it is necessary. But we are getting into the habit of using it, even for indoor meetings of a few hundred people. In the result, it is impairing our faculties of speech by making the proper pitching and modulation of our voices irrelevant. It eliminates the curiously moving quality of the human voice, directly heard. It is destroying the faculty of listening because people who are accustomed to the deafening blare of an amplifier find the unassisted voice thin and (so they think) inaudible. This destruction of the old intimate contact between speaker and audience is a dangerous enemy to that simple, direct communication which is of the essence of true, unexaggerated public advocacy.

The other dangerous modern device is one for which the press must accept a share of responsibility. So great is the natural anxiety of newspapers to be 'first with the latest' that important speeches are nowadays 'reported' before they are delivered. That is to say they are prepared and distributed before they are spoken.

This has made fashionable and perhaps inevitable the reading of speeches. It is, to me, a deplorable thing. The speech ceases to be the obvious expression of the speaker's personality and ideas, since anybody may have written it. The speaker himself misses the stimulus which comes from addressing a living meeting, the impact upon his own mind which a good audience can procure. His speech loses flexibility. It all too frequently ceases to persuade because persuasion depends upon the creation in the mind of the listener of a feeling that the speaker is addressing him, man to man, and is dealing with the point that is troubling his mind.

To many people the art of politics is the art of propaganda. This is, in a sense, true. But again, we must be careful and intelligent if we are not to injure democracy. Extravagance of propaganda defeats itself in the long run, for, while it deludes some, it nauseates others. In my experience personal attacks usually injure the attacker. Yet the practice flourishes. I think we discourage many people from entering public life by our absurd habit, not peculiar to any one country, of seeking emphasis by violence and exaggeration rather than by the making of the fair concession which renders the subsequent criticism so much more effective. Plain people are more likely to believe that your political opponent is a decent fellow, like themselves, but wrong on some great issue, than that he is a consummate rogue whose public errors are doubtless the product of a corrupt and murky private life.

But perhaps the worst attack upon the true art of politics is made by those who cater for those who want their politics served up to them in the form of personal gossip, of chance remarks in corridors, of hints and speculations and rumours. The greater the target, the more it attracts the arrows of the mean and the malicious. The more prevalent this debased view of the art of politics, the fewer people of character and sensibility shall we attract into its service.

Again, the business of political warfare is not to destroy your opponent, but to defeat him. It is one of the glories of our system that it provides not only for government but for opposition. As one who has been a Prime Minister and a Leader of the Opposition, I can say quite confidently that just as there can be no good or stable government without a sound majority, so there will be a dictatorial government unless there is the constant criticism of an intelligent, active, and critical opposition.

Finally, if the democratic politician is really to understand the importance of his art and practice it, he must be a leader. It is still as true as it was when Edmund Burke said it, that a Member of Parliament is not a delegate but a representative, bound to bring not merely his vote but his judgment to the service of his people. Just as a democracy cannot be preserved in war without a great and prevailing physical courage, so it cannot be wisely governed and preserved in peace without moral courage.

All of us who are in politics are disposed to be nervous about current opinion in the electorate. This nervousness is, so to speak, our occupational disease. We therefore need to remind ourselves frequently that we who are in Congress or Parliament are expected to know more about political issues than private citizens. We have great opportunities of study, more authoritative sources of information, a better chance of hearing and considering both sides. We owe our constituents guidance. We are not bound to spend our days, like the gentleman in the old bromide, 'sitting on a fence with both ears to the ground'.

I will say nothing about Philip Drunk or Philip Sober, for such references are always misinterpreted. But I will say that the art of politics is not that of devising ways and means of securing the overthrow of informed judgment by hasty and misinformed opinion, of considered policy by sudden mass emotion. The regiments of politics cannot, with safety to the state, be led from behind.

Many of us, with sincere respect for the carefulness and accuracy of such poll takers as Dr Gallup, are anxious about the effect which this new technique will have upon the practice of politics. If it serves to tell the politician of widely entertained errors which he must attack, well and good. But if it merely tells him to beware, because opinion is against him, many good ideas will, I fear, be abandoned and Gilbert's Duke of Plaza Toro may yet be a President or Prime Minister.

This little essay, may I say before I close, is not (though it may seem so) a guide lecture for beginners by One who Knows. Its arguments are, on the contrary, derived from a political experience in which I have been guilty of practically every indicated error, every fault. But one may have a passion for art without being a great artist.