



In Defence of Politics

Politics is the lifeblood of a free society. Yet many people regard this vital activity with a mixture of apathy and scorn. It is time to stop sniping at politicians and to take up the responsibilities of citizenship. Democracy makes politicians of us all . . .

□ It was Jonathan Swift, a man of God as well as a man of letters, who pointed out that Lucifer was a politician. The Devil had been viceroy of a western province of heaven before inciting the attempted *putsch* that precipitated his fall. Thus hell was created, and Satan and his followers began their endless mischief among mortals. Politicians have had a reputation for unreliability ever since.

According to Swift, it did not take them long to surpass their model. "Although the Devil be the father of lies," he wrote, "he seems, like all great inventors, to have lost much of his reputation by the continental improvements that have been made upon him." Swift then went on to consider what he called "The Art of Political Lying." A political lie, he marvelled, can "make a saint of an atheist, and a patriot of a profligate; can furnish foreign ministers with intelligence, and raise or let fall the credit of a nation." A political lie can conquer kingdoms without a battle; it can change black to white.

The good Dean was indulging in a sport that has flourished from his day to ours, namely making fun of politicians. It is usually a harmless enough pastime, though it has proved perilous in certain circumstances; men have been known to lose their heads for the sake of a political quip. In modern democratic nations, however, a good political joke is always welcome. The Abscam scandal in the United States lately has lent new life to this age-

old art form, giving rise to such one-liners as, "This country's got the best politicians money can buy."

One of history's wittiest political observers was the magnificent American journalist H. L. Mencken. "The saddest life is that of a political aspirant under democracy. His failure is ignominious and his success is disgraceful," he wrote. Mencken maintained that public opinion in the U.S. during the 1920s had been led disastrously astray by a single pervasive false assumption — "that politicians are divided into two classes, and that one of these classes is made up of good ones . . . A good politician, under democracy, is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar."

Mencken was a master at using outrageous overstatements to illuminate valid points, the point in this case being that politicians are a necessary evil. "All of us have been trained, from infancy, in putting up with necessary evils, plainly recognized as evils," he wrote, urging that the same clear-headed recognition be applied to politics. Otherwise, "the danger is that the hopeless voter, forever victimized by his false assumption about politicians, may in the end gather such furious indignation that he will abolish them . . . in one insane swoop, and so cause government by the people, for the people and with the people to perish from the earth."

The interesting thing here is that, in attacking democratic politicians, Mencken is actually rushing to the defence of democratic politics. He is talk-

ing about a good system that has been placed in jeopardy by no-good men. Stripped of its hyperbole, his is a simple plea for political realism. If you expect nothing from politicians, they can never let you down.

Thomas Carlyle delivered a similar message when he remarked that democracy "means despairing of finding Heroes to govern you, and [being] contented with the lack of them." If, now and then, a political hero happens along, so much the better — but voters can spare themselves and the democratic system the wrenching pangs of disillusionment if they act on the assumption that all politicians have feet of clay.

This means that voters should not take what politicians say too literally, especially when they are running for office. It is, after all, unlikely that any human being is as able, wise and honourable as a politician bidding for their favour purports to be. Nor could his opponents be quite as deficient in ability, intelligence and scruples as he says they are. A certain bending and twisting of reality is a necessary feature of the political ritual, a ritual most of us wholeheartedly enjoy as a form of entertainment. There is no serious harm in this as long as it is recognized for the fantasy it is.

It is when politicians start believing their own fantasies that they give cause for worry. This is apt to happen when they gain access to the enthralling trappings of office — the prestige, the authority, the perquisites, the chance to go down in history, the ability to name things after themselves and their own kind. In his "Book of Fallacies," the English political thinker Jeremy Bentham warned against the common pretence that an attack on the ruling party is an attack on virtue and the nation incarnate. History shows that when the notion spreads that a certain body of politicians has a monopoly on all that is good, holy and patriotic, it leads to megalomania, and megalomania leads to abuses of power.

In theory, democratic politicians should not be able to abuse their power, considering the checks, balances, and public scrutiny built into the system. In practice, this has not proved difficult to do — even, as in the case of Senator Joseph McCarthy, while the public looks on. The opportunities for abuse are ample and varied. A dictatorial

leader may fill his inner circle with hangers-on who will do anything to keep him in power. Through graft and patronage, political parties or segments thereof can be transformed into "machines" operated by Tammany Hall-style bosses who exercise the power behind the throne to their own advantage. Wealthy interest groups may buy politicians, and so buy the policies they want.

The best advertising for the system comes from dictators

The system is corruptible, but not intrinsically corrupt. It contains the seeds of its own renewal, rather than of its destruction, as its enemies theorize. The same political parties that can be taken over by tyrants and crooks can also send these individuals packing, and have frequently done so. Time seems to work in favour of the majority of politicians who are concerned with the public well-being. For all its vulnerability, a political party is a basically sound institution. On the national and (in Canada), provincial levels, the party is where democracy begins.

The kind of parties that have grown up here are coalitions of regional, economic and ideological interests. These parties-within-parties vie with one another for influence over the general party policy. That policy is a synthesis of the internal competing interests, filtered through the judgment of the party leadership. The most arbitrary leaders must take close account of the disparate views within their parties. If they ignore too many of them too often, they may find themselves out of jobs.

Once the policy has been formulated, the party's elected members in parliament or the provincial assemblies are expected to support it, along with the policies made extemporaneously by the leadership and party caucus. The argument is frequently put that this makes eunuchs of individual members; but the alternative would be to make a eunuch of parliament. If every member were free to make his or her own individual policy, it would be a Tower of Babel in which little worthwhile could ever be accomplished. Much the same would be true if there were a multiplicity of small parties,

each pursuing its own particular interest. The Fourth Republic of France, which saw 24 governments between 1946 and 1958, is a case in point.

"Party divisions, whether on the whole operating for good or evil, are things inseparable from free government," Edmund Burke wrote. This is evident wherever governments are *not* free. Dictators have always provided the best advertisements for the party system through the fear they show of it. "We abhor political parties. We are against political parties. We have none," General Francisco Franco of Spain once said.

The aim: "The greatest good of the greatest number"

Some critics charge that a system that incorporates no more than three major parties produces politics that are more in the interests of the parties than of the people. And so it often seems. "Damn your principles! Stick to your party!" Benjamin Disraeli is quoted as telling a recalcitrant M.P. In Disraeli's novel *Coningsby*, however, we get an idea of why he held this seemingly wrong-headed attitude. The young hero of the book declines to stand for parliament as a Tory candidate because he believes that members should be able to cross party lines to secure the common bond between property and labour. But he later becomes convinced that, by working within the party, he can best support his ideals.

Compromises are in fact made both within and among the parties that have the same effect as non-partisan agreements. Parliamentary debate can and does change legislation for the better, while tough bargaining over opposition-sponsored amendments has improved many a government bill.

An effective opposition — effective tactically, though it may be weak numerically — is essential to good government. If nothing else, it tends to keep the ruling party on the straight and narrow. "Given a government with a big surplus, a big majority, and a weak opposition, you could debauch a committee of archangels," Sir John A. Macdonald averred.

Though it is a human institution reflecting all the imperfections of the human race, a parliamentary system made up of competing parties is well-designed to meet Jeremy Bentham's primary

aim of government: "The greatest good of the greatest number." Yet when we look around us today, we see the system being treated with either unconscious or open disdain. This is manifest in the trend in recent years to launch political action outside the established process, by demonstrations, boycotts, illegal strikes, and outright terrorism. It is a product of the "instant age" — an age of instant food, instant entertainment, instant gratification of all manner of desires. The battle cry of the times is: "We want action now!"

Despite the anarchic complexion of such campaigns, their real thrust is to put pressure on the political system to do whatever a particular group wants of it. When successful, they have the effect of scrambling the priorities within the system: the most strident demanders may be appeased, but only at the expense of some quieter group that has been waiting its turn for its share of legislative attention and of the resources at hand.

"Power to the people" through working at the grass roots

Political action within the system may come slower, but it is surer and fairer to all sections of the society. It would be more democratic for activists to take their causes to the grass roots level of party politics, which extends "power to the people" in an orderly fashion. It would not, admittedly, be as exciting or as much fun as shouting slogans and waving placards. The democratic process demands patience, tolerance, and realism from those who participate in it. Democracy is hard work.

Another manifestation of the scorn for the system comes in the form of a reflexive and general contempt for politicians. Mencken was quite right that people should have no illusions about them. To Bentham, democratic government was a trust, and "in every public trust the legislator should, for the purpose of prevention, suppose the trustee disposed to break the trust in every imaginable way in which it would be possible for him to reap from it any personal advantage." But taking every precaution to ensure that public business is conducted honestly and competently is a different thing from calling down a plague on the houses of

all politicians. There may be crooks and fakes and bunglers among them, as there are in all walks of life, but that is no reason to treat them all as pariahs. The fact is that the great majority of them are sincerely public-spirited individuals doing a difficult and demanding job on our behalf.

"Mothers all want their sons to grow up to be president, but they don't want them to become politicians in the process," John F. Kennedy observed wryly. The snobbish disinclination of some of the best and brightest minds to lower themselves to the expediencies of politics doubtless has cost us dearly. Senator Sam Ervin, chairman of the committee that investigated the greatest political scandal of our age, the Watergate affair, had this to say on the subject: "If men and women of capacity refuse to take part in politics and government, they condemn themselves, as well as the people, to bad government."

Where the responsibility lies for making democracy work

Too many of us limit our participation in public affairs to standing back and sniping at politicians from a safe distance. This practice is more popular in bad times than in good. One role the public has always been glad to relinquish to politicians is that of scapegoats for society's troubles. To a certain degree, politicians bring this on themselves. When things are going well, they take credit for making the sun shine. They must therefore expect to come in for some irrational reproach for making it rain.

Still, as Walter Lippmann put it, "It will not do to think poorly of the politicians and to talk with bated breath of the voters." Many of the problems with which our elected representatives must grapple — inflation, for example — have been mainly caused by the behaviour of the society at large. We have fallen into the lazy habit of passing on all our failings to the politicians, and then of blaming them when they are powerless to correct them without our co-operation. Much of the cur-

rent public disillusionment with the political process is a result of asking too much of it — and of expecting it to do things for us which we ought to be doing for ourselves.

The political philosophers of ancient Rome framed the theory that democracy is based on an unwritten contract between the state and the citizen. The state undertakes to guarantee the citizen's rights; in return, the citizen undertakes to share in the responsibility for the nation's civil order, prosperity, and defence. It is no mere theory — it is an historical fact — that when citizens abdicate their responsibilities, they place their rights in danger. The vacuum created by their abandonment is filled either by authoritarianism or mob rule, or a dangerous combination of both.

When such a social breakdown occurs, it is usually because the people concerned have failed to build a system that demonstrably strives for "the greatest good of the greatest number." Or, if they have built it, they have failed to keep it in good repair. The only known medium for making democracy work is that much-maligned activity, politics. "Politics!" exclaimed the great Canadian editor Grattan O'Leary. "That is our way of life. That is its foundation, its base."

In O'Leary's words, "We must get our young people, above all, to realize that they have an individual responsibility for what goes on in their country, in their community. If we can achieve that much, and then try to select the best brains to represent us in our legislatures, our parliament, and give them a decent chance to carry on the government of the country, I think our democracy can be made to work. I don't think it can be demonstrated that good government can come in any country unless it comes from the people themselves, from the people realizing that they have a responsibility."

As we complain about the ineffectiveness of our political system, as we sneer at politicians and at the same time ask them for more, as we kick and scream for our special interests and ignore the interests of others, how many of us are living up to that responsibility today?