

Government by the Self-Righteous is Not Good Government

It's a great pleasure for me to have been invited here this evening to speak briefly on the themes touched on in the readings we have just heard as well as in the Psalm.

As a politician it would indeed make life simpler if we could aspire to the perfection envisaged by the writer of psalm 119. Others have done so before. I am reminded of those early settlers in New England who meeting in prayer to consider their future issued afterwards the ringing declaration 1. 'The Saints shall inherit the earth.' 2. 'We are the Saints'-an early example of the origin of the theory of 'Manifest Destiny' that coloured American political thought for so much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In our country we have not since the Civil War in the 17th Century relied so openly on such moral certainties. The Civil War itself exposed their downsides. It was Oliver Cromwell who famously cried in 1650 to the Scottish General Assembly on realising that Scotland's was making overtures to Charles' I son the soon to be Charles II "I beseech you in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you might be mistaken".

But we have enjoyed for a long period the comforting notions of the Whig interpretation of History that viewed our nation's narrative as one of self confident evolutionary progress based on principles of Constitutional monarchy, Parliamentary sovereignty and the Rule of Law and this has tended to give the best gloss possible to political decisions-a Dr Pangloss view of progress so deliciously debunked in Sellars and Yeatman's book 1066 and All That.

Today, however, it usually seems that all that self confidence is gone. As we live on the knife edge of an economic and financial abyss created by debt, the integrity of the political system and its practitioners is called into question. To take the the passage from Ecclesiastes, we have managed as a political class the interesting feat of being categorised as overrighteous, overwise, overwicked and foolish at the same time.

Yet as I know from the personal experience of fifteen years in Parliament, my colleagues from all parties (with a few notable exceptions) do not fit this caricature. Invite them to a seminar in this college held under Chatham House Rules and you will hear assessments of challenges and problems facing our country that show a keen appreciation of both the flaws in the policies they are promoting to address them and in their own human shortcomings affecting the delivery of beneficial change. Yet outside of such settings the admission that there may be uncertainty in the rightness of ideas and policies is interpreted as weakness to be avoided at all cost as it invites ridicule. The Church of England itself is a prime example of this phenomenon. Its efforts at what it would see as prayerful searching after solutions to varied moral and theological questions ranging from women bishops to same sex partnerships to social inequality is attacked as vacillation and a sign of its disempowerment and irrelevance. Self righteous certainties have it seems greater appeal, whether they be of the theological kind or the media fascination with the certainties of the views of UKIP or of Respect.

Yet it does seem to me somewhat strange that this should be so. History is littered with the consequences of giving power to those with self righteous certainties. From Hitler to Stalin to Mao we can follow the politics of revolutionary or fundamentalist aspirations particularly when linked to grievances, in statistics of suffering, death and destruction. It might therefore be thought that honest and principled doubt should be afforded greater recognition and approval.

It can be argued of course that this interest is superficial-a diversion from the mundane drudgery of real political decision making in a mature democracy. But I do sometimes worry about its attractions. A recent example springs to my mind-the debate over the deportation of Abu Qatada. Here an individual whose extremely unpleasant views make him an understandable object of public dislike has been the object not just of a campaign that he should be deported but also of apparently serious argument that to achieve this quickly the state should break or ignore its own laws and rules, including its international obligations which the present Government like its predecessors has publicly stated that it will observe and indeed sets out in a ministerial and civil service code of conduct issued by each Prime Minister. This view was promoted by newspapers and by some politicians who would otherwise pride themselves on the importance of preserving historic liberties. But somehow these freedoms and rights are not seen as extending to such an individual whatever the law might say.

The tone of this polemic is instructive. Like the Pharisee we are invited to derive collective comfort from being better than the object of our hostility and yet in the process to abandon our own principles which alone might justify such self confidence.

This is why law and respect for the law matters. Law is of course an entirely man made construct and in itself it does not guarantee the morality of decisions or outcomes. It may sometimes need repeal or change. But where it has been created through debate and is only changed by due process and is respected by those with power when in force, it offers the surest protection that official actions resulting from strongly and sincerely held beliefs are subject to reflection before they are carried out and the greatest peace and security is provided for those who live under its rule.

None of this, I believe, interferes with the possibility of individuals deploying their skills to promote change, trusting in their own judgment and properly confident in their own beliefs. On the contrary, it is through the willingness to accept being challenged and tested that the true confidence of coming to a right judgment can alone be achieved. If that can first be done then the three texts we have heard become reconcilable one with another. We are not being invited to do nothing because any decision requires the exercise of personal judgment which exposes us to the risk of self righteous hubris and to lead lives of retirement from the world. We are being asked to ensure that we have properly considered alternative viewpoints before making decisions and to be conscious of our own prejudices and weaknesses of judgment.

So if I have a suggestion that I can make for good government based on these readings, it is that we should embrace the willing discussion of the drawbacks of every measure in an environment that is conscious of our inevitable and all too human fallibility of judgment and that the critics of politicians should promote it. If we do that we will go a long way to avoiding government by the self righteous which we are well warned to avoid.

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