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SOME  
THOUGHTS ON  
PUBLIC LIFE

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by  
Edward Grey

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## SOME THOUGHTS ON PUBLIC LIFE

It is an honour to be asked to give one of this series of memorial lectures, because of the intellectual calibre and attainments of those who have given the preceding lectures, and also because the lectures are given in memory of one whose name is held in respect by all who knew him, and in affection as well as respect to a peculiar degree by those who were intimately associated with him. But I have two disqualifications for giving one of these lectures, and it is with some hesitation that I have accepted the task. One disqualification is that these lectures have hitherto been written documents, which have been read and afterwards printed. My own impaired sight makes it impossible for me to read a lecture. I have therefore no manuscript, and what I shall say must necessarily be of that rough and comparatively ill-ordered nature which pertains to a speech, rather than to a considered and polished lecture. The other shortcoming on my part is that I have not (as the distinguished man, Sir William Bragg, who addressed you last year) sufficient mastery of any particular subject to be able to call myself an authority on that subject. I am going, therefore, to offer you some general reflections which have occurred to me as the result of many years of public life. They will not be exhaustive or profound, but perhaps some of them may be suggestive and useful in stimulating thought on the problems of the present day.

To begin with, I would look back to the time when I first entered public life, not in order that I may praise the 'good old times' or suggest that we should go

back to them, but because a good many people have considerable difficulty at present in knowing exactly where we are. And one way to help in ascertaining where we are is to look back on the road by which we have travelled to the point we have now reached. When I first took part in political life, in 1884, politics were much simpler than they are now. The dominating question at that particular election which followed soon afterwards was the simple question of the extension of the franchise to the counties. There were, it is true, other political questions, but that was the one which dominated that election. It was, in other words, the completing of the establishment of representative government based upon household suffrage. The issue was so simple that there was no distinction between Liberals and Labour. Men like Mr. Burt and Mr. Fenwick, who were as truly Labour men as any Labour representative of the present day, belonging to, and coming to Parliament direct from, the class of wage-earners, were as much members of the Liberal Party as anyone else. They were offered, and they accepted, membership of the Liberal Party on precisely the same terms and conditions as other Liberal politicians. The issue was very simple, and putting aside the Irish Party, there were only two great Parties—Liberal and Conservative—the Liberal Party having Labour members amongst it. We did not ask many questions, at any rate not so many as we do now. It was assumed that if the government was established on a real representative basis, all the shortcomings of which the country might have been conscious under previous less representative systems of government would find a remedy.

The first thing which occurred to us soon afterwards was that the shortcomings which were really due to previous systems of government did not entirely coincide with the shortcomings which were thought

to be due to them. The things which were due to them were no doubt remedied by the more democratic representative government; but there remained many things, which were thought to be due to previous systems of government, which were, in fact, due to other causes.

At that time no one questioned that democratic representative parliamentary government was the best form of government, and that as far as any government could do it, it would satisfy the needs of the community. Where do we stand to-day? When I entered political life it was the latter part of the epoch of the establishment of democratic representative government. We have lived on to-day into an epoch which regards democratic representative government as on its trial. Its merits and efficiency are questioned as they were not questioned when we were engaged in establishing it. In some countries democratic representative government is no longer regarded as an ideal at all. I do not take what has happened in Russia as an instance, because Russia has never had representative government, and what has never had a trial cannot be said to be superseded or discarded by what has taken place in Russia. But what has happened in Italy lately is very significant. Italy had democratic representative government, but it has now been superseded by something which presumably must have much popular support behind it, but which is not based upon parliamentary election, but on organized force. For the present, at any rate, that system of government which we have regarded as the ideal in this country has been suspended in Italy; and it is possible that under the shock of confusion and chaos that still exists in Europe you may see democratic representative government in some other countries go down, at any rate for a time, in favour of some other system.

There are many people to-day who question the efficacy of democratic representative government in a way that it has never been questioned before. Personally, I remain as attached to democratic representative government as I have ever been. I am not going over a long list of achievements under that system, such as development of education, the general standard of life, and the securing of impartial administration of justice—a long list might be given under which democratic representative government, compared with systems which preceded it, must be pronounced a great success. But there are people who judge it, not by the standard of what preceded it, but by the standard of what they think ought to be done; and it is possible to argue, at any rate as regards some things which have been done in recent years under democratic representative government, that they might have been accomplished under some other system.

There is, however, one thing which I believe to be indisputable—it is this: that under democratic representative government we are enjoying the greatest amount of individual personal liberty that has ever been enjoyed in any country. I was once present at a conversation that interested me, which took place in the United States between two people, both of experience and intelligence, who were comparing life in the United States with life in Great Britain. One of them said: ‘What I like in the United States is the entire absence of all class feeling; in England, there are the old class traditions, the barriers of reserve, and there is still, though less than there used to be, a considerable amount of class feeling. In the United States some people are richer than others, but there is not the same consciousness of class differences; there is a sense of everybody meeting as equals with a frankness and absence of embarrassment or reserve which I find exceedingly refreshing.’ (My

own short experience of the United States made me feel that too.) The other man said: 'That is true, but on the other hand, there is in the United States more executive interference with personal liberty than there is in Great Britain, and American people here are more tolerant of that interference.' (I cannot of my own knowledge express an opinion on this point.) But the conversation interested me, and set me thinking—to what is our personal liberty in this country really due, and what is its chief guarantee? It seems to me that its great guarantee is this: that not only have we a government elected by popular vote, but dependent from day to day, when Parliament is sitting, upon the confidence of the representatives of the people in the House of Commons: if anything occurs in this country which is regarded as an undue interference with personal liberty of individuals, of whatever class, or if anything occurs which outrages our sense of fairness, it is known that either the government must put that right or cease to exist. The daily responsibility, when Parliament is sitting, of the government to the elected representatives of the people is, I consider, our great guarantee of personal liberty. I cannot imagine any other system of government which would not interfere with personal liberty to a much greater extent than the system we now have. It is possible to argue that we might gain certain advantages by some other system of government, but I am sure the price we should have to pay would be that of submitting to much greater interference with personal liberty than under the system we have at present. This asset of personal liberty is so great that whatever shortcomings there may be in the present system, I prefer the ills of the present to the ills of any other system, which would impose new and stringent restrictions on personal liberty.

I am, therefore, examining shortcomings, not with

the object of showing that democratic representative government is something that could with advantage be superseded or replaced, but to consider how best it can be strengthened and improved. One of the things to beware of in democratic representative government is reliance upon formulas which may not be based on sound premisses. There is no more pleasing formula than that of 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. In Abraham Lincoln's great speech it had a magnificent place. But it is well not to use that formula too confidently. It presupposes that the people are both willing and capable of governing. If they are not willing and capable of governing, the formula has no value. In the same way, consider 'government by public opinion' as a formula. Public opinion—that highest tribunal with which I have heard leaders of opposition threaten governments in the House of Commons. It is an admirable formula; but it presupposes not only that public opinion exists, but that on any particular question there is a public opinion ready to decide the issue. Indeed, it presupposes that the supreme statesman in democratic government is public opinion. Many of the shortcomings of democratic government are due to the fact that public opinion is not necessarily a great statesman at all.

For example, I will take the history over a long series of years of our dealings with Ireland. For a long time there was practically no public opinion about Ireland. It knew nothing about and was not interested in Ireland. That was not statesmanlike. Many of the evils of British government in Ireland were due to that. Then one of the great English parties adopted Home Rule, and public opinion did become very interested indeed in Ireland. But it was so divided that as a matter of fact it did not make it possible for any policy to be consistently pursued. I dare say his-

torians of the future will find fault with the want of statesmanship in British dealings with Ireland, and they will find fault with statesmen: but the real fault was, I think, with public opinion. The Home Ruler will hold that if there had been a sufficiently overwhelming public opinion to make Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule measure prevail in 1886, Irish difficulties would have been solved. Unionists, on the other hand, will hold that if only public opinion had been solid in supporting the policy of Lord Salisbury and Mr. Balfour, and in giving no countenance to Home Rule, the Irish problems would have been solved in that way. The answer of both Mr. Gladstone and Lord Salisbury might well be: that each believed in his own policy for Ireland, but that neither of them had had a real chance to give effect to his policy. Either might have been right or either might have been wrong. But public opinion was so divided that neither policy was given a sufficient chance of success. That is want of statesmanship in public opinion.

It is true that a definite policy towards Ireland has been adopted now, but I think public opinion acquiesced in it rather than approved it. I am not thinking of criticizing it. But I do think that public opinion acquiesced in that settlement, not so much as an act of statesmanship or of considered opinion as from passive acquiescence due to sheer exhaustion. If that be so, it leads to this reflection: that in a democratic representative government we want statesmanship, and the only secure basis of statesmanship is that public opinion should be statesmanlike.

That carries me a little farther to another reflection. In those years—from 1885 to 1914—the great dividing issues between parties were the extension of the franchise to the counties, Irish Home Rule, and Tariff Reform. These three questions were purely political questions; that is to say, they could be



carried into operation by Act of Parliament, by a stroke of the parliamentary pen, and could have been put into operation in no other way. That alone made the problem comparatively simple and entirely one for political parties.

But, now, what is the most important domestic question in our public affairs at the present moment? I should say it is the relations between Capital and Labour—between employers and employed. It transcends in importance all questions of domestic politics. How far is that a political question in the sense of being one to be solved by parties in the House of Commons? If you hold that the solution is the destruction of private enterprise, the nationalization of great industries, of course it is a political question to be settled by Parliament. But I think the majority of people, deeply impressed as they are by the fact that relations between Capital and Labour are not satisfactory, are not yet of opinion that nationalization would make things better; and although they are convinced that there ought to be and must be a change, they are looking for the change in other directions. Now, in what direction? I read the other day a book, evidently written with knowledge and I think with a sincere desire to be impartial, on the subject of what the great mass of organized labour really most desires. What are the points which are at the moment causing the most interest and anxiety amongst the wage-earning classes? I give them in the order stated by the writer as that in which they are felt by wage-earners to be most urgent and important to themselves.

The first is security against unemployment—not merely to relieve present unemployment, but to give security against it in the future. The writer had gathered from the wage-earners themselves that, if they could have security against the apprehension that employment might not be permanent, it would be

regarded by them as one of the greatest assets they could obtain.

Well, I believe the best way of dealing with that point, the most helpful way of dealing with it, with the minimum of waste and the avoidance of abuse, combined with the maximum of efficiency, would be a real insurance against unemployment in the great trades themselves. I do not want to argue the merits of this. My point is that if this be so, though government may assist, it is in the main something that must be worked out by employers and employed acting together.

Second, the writer puts the status of the worker. The wage-earners, he said, resent having no share in the businesses, and not merely no share in the management, but they resent the feeling that all arrangements for carrying on the business which affects their daily life are made solely with reference to the convenience of the employer, without the workers being considered or given any share in the ordering of the work. That is to say, the workers desire to be regarded not as mere parts of a machine, but as something to be consulted in the working of that machine.

That is a difficult question. I do not believe that Parliament could settle it satisfactorily. It is a most important question; but it can be dealt with, and must be dealt with, by goodwill and statesmanship on the part of employers and employed, dealing with each other direct and not by the indirect route of Parliament.

Third, the writer puts the question of wages—that the workers should get the maximum share that is possible out of the profits of the industry. That again is a question which I do not believe can be settled by the State, but must be settled by employers and employed; that is to say, by the great organized bodies of employers and the great organized bodies of labour consulting together.

These questions, which are of vital importance, are questions that require great statesmanship, just as much statesmanship as is required in dealing with problems in Parliament, but the statesmanship will have to be applied direct by the people concerned themselves. In democracy there is more than ever need for statesmanship: and if democracy is to work well in dealing with many problems which could not be dealt with adequately through parliamentary representatives, the people most concerned must apply that statesmanship direct in dealing with their own problems.

Having arrived at this point, that there is a great need for more statesmanship in public opinion, let us ask, What is the remedy? The true answer, I believe, is in the word 'education'. Not primary, not secondary, but adult education, the education which the people give themselves after they have got past the best primary and secondary education they can get. In other words, it is the bringing of university education within reach of those who have had secondary education and are now engaged in various professions and other walks of life. I am told that there is an immense demand for that form of education: that there is a real thirst for it, such as has hitherto been unknown. If that is so, it is a demand that should be met, and happily, it is one that can be met. It has the advantage over primary and secondary education, in that it costs infinitely less in money to bring a good university education within the reach of those who wish to take advantage of it—because you do not require a vast outlay on new school buildings and the cost of maintaining such, which is necessary for primary or secondary education. I am told that £500,000 a year would do an enormous amount in this way for people who realize that the education that really becomes part of a man or woman's self is the education that they

seek and find themselves, when they are grown up. £500,000 a year would do an immense national service in this way.

Another great source of education is the press. My own unfortunate disability of sight prevents me from being able to make extensive reading of the press. But from what reading I do make, I find it very easy to get very much admirable information in the press, and to find leading articles which, whether or not I agree with the particular conclusions, are evidently written with knowledge, thought, and force. If you have any criticism to make on the press, I think the answer of the press would be this: those who control the press study the circulation of their papers; people can have the sort of press they deserve, and it rests with the people themselves. As I have said, from my own experience, you can to-day get excellent education from the press, and it rests with the people themselves to secure and read the press where it is to be found.

A third source of education is the politicians themselves. I have no sympathy with the abuse of politicians. I would say again, that the people get the politicians they deserve. The remedy is in their own hands. I would make only this one point on this subject. There is too much tendency (take the literature which is issued at political elections, for example) to talk down to people unnecessarily, instead of expecting people to come up to a higher level. I have seen political leaflets—I won't say from which party they came—that seemed to be written on the assumption that the average elector was childish, absolutely ignorant, and entirely selfish. I think that political literature or speeches which under-estimate the mental or moral level of the community are simply so much waste. They do not get real response from democracy: a great response is given only to an appeal

to the higher and not the lower instincts and feelings of the community.

This was brought to my mind in strong and convincing manner by having the good fortune during the war to have many conversations with the late Mr. Page, who was American Ambassador to this country. What an inestimable debt this country owes to him it is now beginning to understand! I cannot here review his career, or enter upon an extensive eulogy of Mr. Page; there was no man for whom I came to have a greater admiration and personal regard, but I can only tell you to-day two things which impressed me specially about him, and which occur to me now as being specially relevant to this point.

One was his intense feeling for right against wrong. Once he became sensible that a moral issue was involved, from that moment right or wrong was the supreme test with him. It decided his opinion absolutely, and made him on that particular issue have all the conviction, the fervour, the energy that a man has who is possessed with strong views on the question of religion. The other point was this: that having convinced himself on what was right, nothing would shake his belief that if a great democracy, especially his own democracy, was appealed to on a vital question in a great manner, it would most certainly respond. If a democracy did not respond to a great appeal, his view was, not that the appeal was above their heads, but that the appeal had not been lofty enough. If only it was great, lofty, and noble, his faith was that democracy, when so appealed to, would rise and respond. I never met any one who made me feel so certain that his trust in the people was sincere, deep, and unshakeable. The late Mr. Page was a man who really did trust the people. I regarded him as the most convinced believer in democracy that I have ever known. These two qualities of Mr. Page

I have referred to as being qualities upon which politicians, I think, could rely more than they do, and which they should particularly encourage and cultivate.

To sum up the past, I would observe that one of the great dangers in democracy is the lack of interest, lethargy, and therefore absence of public opinion. There is no better, no more certain corrective of that than to make it clear that moral issues are involved. Once that is made clear, the public interest is certainly aroused. The other danger is the great activity on the part of a section of public opinion, an activity which is ill-informed and therefore misdirected, an activity which is based on the assumption that they know everything, when as a matter of fact they may know very little. The greatest corrective of that is education, particularly adult education.

One factor no doubt in interesting democracy, in making public opinion vital, is to have in public life striking personalities. It is not enough that there should be only ideas, knowledge, and principles: there must be strong and vivid personalities. The history of all religions is an illustration of what I mean. Moral principles have always been something of which different generations of men have been aware: but there comes at certain great epochs in human history some great person in whom these great principles are embodied, and they at once become vital and living, moving masses of mankind in a way they have not done before. I am not thinking merely of Christianity, but of all great religious movements, such as Mohammedanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. You find behind these great movements a great personality.

So in our public affairs we want personalities who are striking and interesting, and who become the embodiment of fine and lofty ideas. There is indeed this danger, that a democracy may set too high

a premium upon the gift of public speaking. The public man becomes interesting by the gift of public speaking, and we are apt to over-estimate people through admiration of the excellence of their speech. Cogency of language, as we listen to it, makes us feel that there must be behind it knowledge, firmness, a lofty moral purpose—all the great qualities that we want a man to possess—but it does not follow that those things are behind the gift of speech. Sometimes, one thinks that in a democracy the gift of public speech has an undue advantage over other qualities, and that democracy is likely to be led away and to mistake some of the smaller men for the greater men, and to ignore some of the greater men who may not have the same gift of eloquence. I do not think that danger is so great as might be supposed. I think it was Wordsworth who, towards the end of the eighteenth century, after hearing some of the great speakers in Parliament of that day, said that ‘he came away from listening to Burke with his head full; from listening to Fox with his feelings excited; and from listening to Pitt with astonishment at his power to make the worse appear the better reason’.

But there are many men who have qualities greater than their gift of speech. The late Mr. Thomas Burt was an excellent speaker; yet there were many other excellent speakers, some of them more effective than he in making an audience cheer, who never attained the same influence in public life. The reason was this: that Mr. Burt’s ascendancy was due not so much to his gift of speech, in which he did not surpass some others, as to the character, sincerity, wide knowledge, and range of mind which informed his speech. And so in the long run, I do believe that, though for public life a certain gift of speech is necessary, the man with character and wide understanding of human problems will win in the end, as against the man with remarkable

gift of speech, but deficient in character or real ability of thought and understanding.

Another point worth considering—besides the effect of public men on public life—is the effect of public life on public men. Most of us are people of mixed motives. For instance, when we begin to prepare a speech, we may think solely of the merits of our subject: but before we come to deliver our speech there will have crept into it things which have been prompted by a desire to please and to succeed. It is quite right that there should be some such things in every speech. The late Professor Jowett (I do not know if it is true) is said to have advised a man, when writing, to read his manuscript carefully and to strike out anything that struck him as being particularly fine. You could not apply that to public speaking; nobody would listen. I remember an amusing story (told, I think, by Mr. Bernard Shaw) of a man who was a keen politician but a bad speaker. His imperfections in this respect were counter-balanced by excellence in playing the concertina. In order to collect a crowd at the street corner, he would play his concertina. When he spoke, the audience gradually diminished. His concertina was then brought into play again, and the crowd would again collect. In this way he sought to get his points brought home to the people. It is legitimate, with most of us it is even necessary, that in our speeches there should be a certain amount of concertina playing, if we are fortunate enough to have any gift for playing it.

As to mixed motives, I would credit a parliamentary candidate with three motives, viz.: (1) A desire to serve the interests of the country; (2) a desire to serve the interests of his party, believing that this was the most practical form in which to achieve the former object; (3) a desire for personal success, which may be a legitimate, indeed wholesome motive, provided it is



kept within bounds ; because with the ordinary man—I am not speaking of rare idealists—the desire for personal success greatly facilitates his work and helps him to get hard work out of himself. But that desire has its dangers. The tendency is, in the long run, for a man's views of public life to be decided not by the interest of the country but by the desire for personal success, which at the beginning is to be regarded as a useful stimulus, but which is not the highest, and should never become the dominant, motive. There is a law, I believe, in currency, which says that if good money and bad money are put into circulation together, the bad money drives out the good. And there is a tendency for the inferior motive to drive out the superior motive in a man's character.

The sound advice, therefore, to a young man entering public life, is to watch his motives, to watch them constantly and carefully. In public life, if all secrets were known, we should probably find in the record of public men a considerable proportion who started their life with high motives and ended it dominated by smaller ones. I would say, watch your motives, be honest with yourselves about your motives. That, I believe, is one of the most important rules for any man to observe in dealing with public affairs, and indeed in all the conduct of his life.

It was said once that there were seven wise men in Greece, who gained their reputation by their wise sayings. One of them apparently contributed greatly to his reputation by the saying: 'Know thyself'. I used to think that he got his reputation cheaply. I am convinced now that there is a very large number of people who do not know themselves, and I am quite certain from my own experience that, instead of being easy, it is exceedingly difficult to know oneself. The more we can know ourselves, the better we are for public service. The more we can keep the higher

motives in the dominant place in ourselves, the less likely we are to be driven from our course by being over-blamed or over-praised. Public men are nearly always being over-blamed or over-praised, and the more knowledge they have of themselves, the less likely they are to be unduly depressed by the one or to be unduly elated by the other.

There is a story which is useful for a man in public affairs to remember. It runs : that in olden times an oriental Sultan ordered his Grand Vizier to get engraved on his favourite ring a motto which would encourage him in adversity and keep him modest in prosperity. It had necessarily to be a short sentence, and yet it must serve this double purpose. The Grand Vizier was equal to the occasion. He advised the Sultan to have engraved on the ring the following sentence : 'And this also shall pass away'. That does not mean that our attitude is to be one of 'waiting to see it pass away' : but it means that, being sure of our motives and our principles, we should hold them fast in success and should not be unduly depressed when we find things are not going as we wish. This latter aspect of the motto is specially to be commended in the present time, when things are certainly not going as we wish. It should encourage us to persist and to hold on to the course which we think right. At the present moment, when many things seem to be going wrong, although we may not be able to put them right all at once, yet if the country makes up its mind to stand by what it thinks is right, and if it hoists its standard, other peoples, although perhaps not immediately, may gradually rally round that standard.

To most people it is essential that they should continually examine the motives from which they act. There are a few exceptions, men so happily constituted that they have little or no need for this. Unconsciously, and without effort on their part, their

motives remain unselfish, sincere, and pure. I know no better instance of that purity and unselfishness of motive in a public capacity than the fourth Earl Grey, in whose memory these lectures are given. He was not without a just pleasure in popularity and in good reputation. He was not without a just sense and a proper pride in the value of a distinguished public position or office. But when he approached a public question he became so possessed by enthusiasm for the ideal, that no other motive except that of promoting this ideal, without regard to the cost to himself or the effect on his own personal reputation, had any weight with him. It is rare in a public man to have this quality in such a remarkable degree. I had differences of opinion with him on questions of the day, and I dare say many of these lectures will contain things with which he might not have agreed, for you will never get men of active and able minds who are all in agreement on all their conclusions. Yet there can be no better preparation for those who give these memorial lectures than to reflect upon his life from the point of view of the motives which inspired him. He, at any rate, never lacked interest in public affairs; he was always enthusiastic and unselfish, and his interest was ardent, sincere, and generous. One who knew him well said of him—and it was true—‘He lit many fires in cold rooms’. That is one high type of spirit which we need in our public men. That is the spirit which will make the lectures given here worthy memorials of him. That is the spirit in which I have tried to address you to-day—not so much to give instruction, as to consider where we are at the present time: how we can remedy some of the shortcomings of the present day, in what spirit we should try to solve our urgent problems. And my last word would be—in these difficult times, let us, as far as we possibly can, regard fairly and wisely these complicated questions

whether at home or abroad, putting aside individual prejudices, earnestly striving to deal with them on their merits, adopting no popular conclusions which we feel to be unsound, but shrinking from none that we believe to be worthy and right, and doing our best to contribute to make a public opinion which shall be alert, interested, sound, and statesmanlike.

PRINTED IN ENGLAND  
AT THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
BY FREDERICK HALL