



That Was Right- Principle in Politics

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If you stand on the basis of principle you may go wrong, but you will never go far wrong, said Prime Minister Robert Menzies in his 1954 address to the IPA.

This is an extract of one of the most important speeches ever made by Menzies as prime minister. On 10 April 1954, then Prime Minister Robert Menzies spoke at the Athanaeum Club in Melbourne for an IPA members function. More than sixty years later, what Prime Minister Menzies said that evening still applies now.

I very well remember the establishment of the IPA. And I'm a politician. I know a good deal about being out and beaten and I know something about being, in the homely phrase, "home and hosed". What I liked about the institution of the IPA was that it was designed to get people of moment, of significance in the industrial and business world, to do some clear objective thinking. For after all, a government goes in or a government goes out, but what matters in the country is that there should always be a body of honest, objective thought which means that a great number of leaders of opinion have clear minds and clear long range ideas. I would have great doubt as to



whether any solid clear thinking and constructive thinking had been done and published in Australia superior to that of the IPA in this State.

Political people like myself read all kinds of things. [E]very now and then, every man who has the great responsibilities in his own country ought to be lifted up out of the particular into the general. He ought every now and then to be given the opportunity of saying: "Well that's right, I think I'm right, I've made this decision and that decision and that decision, but now let me take two or three days to consider how all that fits into the pattern of what I regard as my own philosophy." That I think is tremendously important. [T]he publications of the IPA have been beyond value because they have always set out to be objective and to be philosophic, to put the matter in the broad, to give us all an opportunity of fitting our thinking into a real pattern.

The Institute has not set itself up as a mere advocate of a political cause, and I would be the last one to expect that it would. What we need in Australia, what is needed in all free countries, is a body of men who don't set themselves up to say that the government is always right or that the government is always wrong. [S]peaking as one with a fairly long experience in these fields, I know that a government is not always right, that a government can feel that it is right most of the time and, always feel that it was honest about what it did, even if it turned out to be wrong. That is as much as any mortal man in public affairs may aspire to.

And therefore the Institute of Public Affairs set out to develop what I hope I won't too pompously describe as a philosophic line. What is the general basis of our thinking? And if we have a political philosophy on these matters, then we can test things by it. If we feel that a government, even a government that we like in the broad, is wrong judged by that yardstick, then we will say so, and I don't think that any intelligent political man objects to that.

Our great danger in Australia, and we are nearer to it at this moment than we perhaps ever were before, is that we should abandon political principle in favour of a series of purely *ad captandum* arguments: "That's worth some votes—that ought to bring somebody in." Of all the menaces in the political world, that is the worst.

If you stand on the basis of principle you may go wrong but you will never go far wrong. You may go wrong according to the current political judgement, but in the long run somebody will be heard to say, "That was right".

If I did something today which I thought was dead right for this country and they threw me out, I'd rather like to think that in 30 years' time—when I've been dead and buried—the fellows who wrote the records would say, "That was right".

You see, political principle, a genuine philosophy, a genuine body of doctrine in your own mind—not an academic body of doctrine—but that warm, distinctive feeling that decent men have, that's right. That's the most important thing in public affairs.

The greatest problem in politics is assumed to be the problem of whether you win a by-election or lose it, or whether you win a general election or lose it—and if that's the greatest problem in



politics then let me tell you that politics is just not worthwhile.

Because in Australia we have a general election for the Lower House every three years and when we're two years old, there will be a Senate election, and a year later there will be a general election for the Lower House. And in the meantime, there have been six State elections and in the meantime there have been byelections.

I don't think anybody in Australia has yet fully realised how utterly inconsistent with good government this plenitude of elections can be. But so far as I'm concerned, I've been in Parliament for 25 years, and if I have not fought thirteen or fourteen elections in that time, then I'll eat my hat. This is monstrous! Just as you're about to get people to understand that this is the thing that ought to be done over the next five years somebody says, "Wait a moment, there's an election in six months' time or twelve months' time and people won't like it".

Well, that creates great difficulties. But might I try to say something to you about the classical choice that confronts us. We can have political principles with no sense of expediency or we can have expediency with no sense of principles. I'm putting it inaccurately, but I'm putting it in a stark form.

This is a masterpiece of modern thinking. It's the perfect false dichotomy that you're presented with all around the world. You're either in favour of A or you're in favour of B. It's hardly ever true.

It is not true to say that if you have principle you can never consider expediency. It's damnably untrue to say that if you bow a little to expediency then you must abandon all principle.

What we have to discover is how to pursue principle, how to pursue what is just. And when we accommodate ourselves to the expediency of current events, let us regard it as a mere side-current which doesn't blow us off our course but from which we can always return to what we think to be right. That is the greatest problem of politics.

I welcome criticism, I welcome complaint, I welcome grievance. But I would have a very poor opinion of myself, if, having set my course by a star and being blown aside by some temporary storm, I then decide to retrace my course. When you are blown aside by a storm, well, you must recognise it and, to that extent, you go with the storm. But always at the end you must take your bearings and resume your course.

That's the hardest thing in public life, and because that's the hardest in public life, it's terribly important that people like myself, who have devoted themselves to political affairs, should know that there are men, honest, upright, able, experienced men who sit down and say, "That is our body of principle."

And the whole thing is that with all the rough weather and the cross currents, politics is not worth being in if, when you leave it, you find that what you think is good for your country is further afield than when you went into it.

We all go through a remarkable experience in politics in our lives. I occasionally have one of the

younger, more enthusiastic members of my party come into me and say, "You know I don't agree about so and so, it offends me and I must vote against the government." I've had quite a little experience of that. And I'm always able to say, "Don't apologise for having that view ... Speak up and tell me what you think."

And then they tell me what they think. And nine times out of ten what is said to me is that, "This is not my judgement. What the government and the party has decided is not my judgement, and therefore I must be at liberty to vote in a different direction."

And do you know what my answer is? I say:

"Never fall into the error of thinking your experience is peculiar to yourself. Never forget that the leader of a party, and a *fortiori*, the leader of a government, frequently is over-ruled. Time after time I have submitted views that have been over-ruled. What am I to do? Am I to break up the Cabinet every time I'm in a minority? Am I to convert steady government in Australia into a sort of French government system in which governments flicker and flow week by week, month by month? Of course not!"

When I find that the overwhelming view of the Cabinet is that something should be done, then—unless it is a matter of principle on which no man ought to forswear himself—I accept it and I go into the House and I put it; and I go onto the platform and I'll fight anybody about it.

This is practical politics. And unless we had that kind of thing we would have such uncertainty of policy and administration that this country would be unstable.

You can't always have your own way in this life. But what helps me a great deal is not to have a man who arrests me and bashes my ear about some interest of his, and throws out a broad hint that unless the government decides his way he's against it. I've no time for that—I'm utterly unmoved by it.

But what I do like to think is that a responsible man, a leading man here, can say to me, "So and so". And if I say, "I'm sorry I can't do that", he will not at once go away and become an enemy and whisper in dark corners. But he will go away and say, "Well, after all I can't have that. What do I really believe in? What do I stand for? Is this deplorable character Menzies nearer to what I believe in as a body of principle than these bandwagon experts that I see in other parts of Australia?"

If it's all expediency, if it's all what will win votes next week or next month, you don't need me. All you need is a few, humble obedient time-servers and if those are what you want, you'll get them.

We get in the long-run what we want and if we want time-servers, and if we want vote-catchers, if we want short-term "pleasers", let them have them. But you know, if politics were really a matter of occupying a job, how many of us would be in it?

[W]hat I ask you to realise is that people like myself go into this life because they have beliefs, because they have a faith, because they believe there is something that matters for their own



country.

And if they believe that, then don't be beguiled by this false choice of expediency or principle. Remember always that a great deal of principle and—occasionally—a little expediency is much better than impracticable principle and is a million times better than principled expediency.