

PRINCIPLE AND EXPEDIENCY

The following extracts have been taken from an address by the Rt. Hon. R. G. Menzies given on the 10th April to a representative gathering in Melbourne. The address was of outstanding quality and the thoughts expressed here will be of value to all those interested in public affairs. We are indebted to the Prime Minister for his kind permission to publish these extracts in "Review."

POLITICAL people like myself read all kinds of things. If I get a chance I like to read Ngaio Marsh's last detective story. But failing that, and failing that means, probably, occasionally for a period of three months, it is my great fortune or misfortune to read blue books, to read Treasury Reports, to read the last statistics, to read the Cabinet Papers, and although they are very important, every now and then every man who has 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.

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, because, speaking as one with a fairly long experience in these fields, I know, nobody better, that a government is not always right, that if a government can feel that it is right most of the time, and what's much more important, 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 if we have a general philosophy on these matters then we can test things by it. If we feel that any 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.

A philosophic line, a body of principle, and if I may say so, gentlemen, 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." Look, of all the menaces in the political world, that is the worst. If you stand on a basis of principle you may go wrong but you will never go far wrong. You may go wrong according to the current political judgment, but in the long run somebody will be heard to say: "That was right." I know that we are all human and most of us, I suppose, like to feel that we will be given credit in six months or twelve months or two years, for something that was right. I don't want to appear to be a self-righteous person—I hope I'm not. But if I did something today which I thought was dead right for this country and they threw me out, like that, 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 instinctive feeling that decent men have that that's right. That's the most important thing in public affairs.

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THE greatest problem in politics is I suppose 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 worth while. Because in Australia we have a general election for the Lower House every three years and when we're two years old, under the present circumstances, 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 by-elections. I don't think anybody in Australia has yet fully realised how utterly inconsistent with good government this plenitude of elections can be. If we're going to have good government in Australia it's high time that we had parliaments that lasted for five years. It's high time that we put people

into office and said to them: "You have five years in which to give effect to your policy." But so far as I'm concerned I've been in Parliament, and I don't apologise for it, for 25 years, and in that time I must have fought 13 or 14 elections. This is monstrous! It's terrible! 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."

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WELL, that creates great difficulties. But might I try, gentlemen, to say something to you about the classical choice that confronts us. We can politically have principles with no sense of expediency or we can have expediency with no sense of principles. That's what some people say. I'm putting it inaccurately but I'm putting it in a stark form. There are those who say to us: "Principle without expediency"; and there are others who say: "Expediency without principle". This is a masterpiece of modern thinking. It's the perfect, false dichotomy that you're presented with all round 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 principle. A very much greater authority than myself, or anyone else in this room, said: "All things are just, but all things are not expedient." 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 I believe, Mr. Chairman, is the greatest problem of politics. And one of the great troubles about politics is that those who, for their sins, like myself, are in the middle of it, living with it, sleeping with it, year by year, sometimes feel disposed to say, when we read the words of some critic: "If only he knew about these matters." You see, I'm not asking to be free of criticism, and nobody thrives more on it than

I do. 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 decided 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 thing in public life, because that's the hardest thing in public administration, it's terribly important that people like myself, who have devoted their years to political affairs, should know that there are men, honest, upright, able, experienced men who, from time to time, sit down and say: "That is our body of principle." And say why it is, and collect the facts, and make objective judgments. And the whole thing is that, with all the rough weather and the cross currents and so on, politics is not worth being in if when you leave it you find that what you think is good for your country is further astern than when you went into it.

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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 on to 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 as unstable as, I am unhappy to say, France is and in the case of France with such disastrous results in the world.

Please remember that, gentlemen, 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 and I'd like to say to everybody that I'm utterly unmoved by it. But what I do like to think is that in this great city, with all its sanity and balance and responsibility, 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?"

Sir, I'm sorry to have spoken so long and I'm sorry to have become like a man delivering a sermon. But this is one of those rare opportunities. Gentlemen, I invite you to consider that basic matter. If it's all expediency, if it's all what will win votes next week or next month, you don't need me. There are much better phonograph records than myself. All you need is a few humble, obedient time-servers and if those are what you want, you'll get them. There is something about Divine Providence which is magnificent. 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.

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BUT you know, if politics were really a matter of occupying a job, how many of us would be in it? Did anybody suppose that a man like myself who loves the law, and the practice of the law, and the whole philosophy of the law, would go into this turbulent stream, for a job? A job! Of course not! And what I ask you to realise is that people like myself—and I'm not the only one—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 expediency or principle. Remember always that a great deal of principle and, occasionally, a little expediency, is much better than impracticable principle and a million times greater than unprincipled expediency.