

IN DEFENCE OF POLITICS

Fifth Edition

Bernard Crick



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PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

Almost forty years ago my Preface to the first edition began by saying that here was simply an essay 'occasioned' – in the words of Thomas Hobbes – 'by the disorders of the present time'. It was an attempt 'to justify politics in plain words by saying what it is ... I believe the essential matter to be very simple. The reader may welcome an unfashionable attempt to avoid covering him with all the author's chaff on everything before ever the grain is reached.... I am constantly depressed by the capacity of academics to over-complicate things.... [So this is not] a systematic treatise ... simply an attempt, inspired by seeing a fairly obvious impatience with politics in the new nations of the world, and provoked by a personal dislike of exhortation and mere cant about "the ideals of freedom", to describe what in fact are the minimum benefits of politics as an activity ...'

The essay arose mainly from conversations with a German friend to share grounds for hope that her people could exorcize the past and establish a political or republican tradition of active citizenship (as they have done so remarkably). But because this was an essay written with some intensity, in one deep breath and at one particular time, I have not in subsequent editions risked spoiling it by making substantial changes to the text, only some minor corrections (as now). References to past events once topical are merely illustrative of general points, not important in themselves, so I have left them unchanged with an occasional

explanatory footnote; I have observed that for most people knowledge of what happened in the generation before they became adult is less than it is for earlier periods (such has been the decline of contemporary history in schools – or was it ever so? The broad shape of the distant hills can be seen but not the dead ground in between).

Since this book had been in print so long (and is now revived by a new publisher), I have felt the need in each new edition to add something timely or more fully explanatory rather than to rewrite. So the brevity of which I once boasted, always enjoying the speculative essay more than the monograph, has suffered. The tail is now almost as big as the dog. But each of these added 'Footnotes' can be read separately, and where only the original text is still in print in translation (with publishers too poor or mean to add the 'Footnotes'), the essential point comes across, not too much is lost. Indeed, I was delighted when I learned that pirated and illicit translations of Chapter 1, sometimes also of Chapter 7, had been circulating in the USSR and in Pinochet's Chile.

Some excuse for the Footnotes may, none the less, be needed. 'A Footnote to Rally the Academic Professors of Politics' was added because, although this was a book intended for the general reader, it has become much read by students. And at that time an absurd either/or debate raged among teachers of politics: that the study must be either science and neutrality, or else commitment and action! The 'fallacy of the excluded middle' was long ago diagnosed but there is still no easy cure. So I wanted to argue that the study of politics is necessarily part of politics, is committed to the preservation of free-politics, but not to any particular form of politics, still less to party doctrine. The professors deceive themselves (and others) in thinking that the study can be a science (except at the cost of intense triviality) or that it can, in some refined, pure philosophical way, avoid relevance to actual politics. But commitment to freedom and political rule becomes discredited if the authority of the teacher or the curiosity of the student is tied tightly to a particular cause or orthodoxy, becoming, in Michael Oakeshott's scathing words, 'a hedge-priest for some doubtful orthodoxy'.

Having said that, however, I came to see that my position was often misunderstood. I did not mean to argue for less commitment to political life (indeed I find little that is new, though much that is very welcome, in the current rediscovery of positive citizenship), only that academic authority should not be invoked for comprehensive commitments; and, above all else, that all commitments should and could take a political

form. A whole chapter had dealt with the dangers of three typical positions: the non-political conservative, the a-political liberal and the antipolitical socialist. Perhaps the polemic against the latter sounded so strong (as family quarrels could be in the far-off days of Marxist intellectual hegemony – or so they thought) that some readers took me for an eccentric Burkean conservative. They did not seem to notice that I had said in that very section, deliberately polishing an epigram, that ‘indifference to human suffering discredits free regimes’ (thinking of unemployment and poverty quite as much as of famine and concentration camps). And I also said, with only a little irony, that ‘to think of the growth of the British Labour movement is to be impressed not with the efficacy of a single doctrine, but with the wonder of politics’ (meaning that when judged by behaviour and deeds, not by rhetoric, the British Labour Party has always practised and sustained parliamentary politics in a pluralistic manner, as much as the other main parties in Great Britain).

So I added the ‘Footnote to Rally Fellow Socialists’ (which grew into a Fabian pamphlet and then a small book) to defend a democratic socialist tradition that is thoroughly political. Perhaps this was a self-indulgence which risked that some readers would then see this as a committed book, and switch off. But I thought it important to tell some fellow socialists bluntly to stop pretending that they had an all-embracing, self-sufficient and exclusive system, superior to normal (what they called bourgeois) political restraints and values; and also to tell some Conservatives that they discredit and devalue political debate if they portray all socialism as either a spendthrift half-way house to old Communism or a frustrated form of it. I was stung into this Footnote by a chance incident. A thoughtful Derbyshire miner (in the days when there were miners) said to me, after reading the book in an extra-mural class: ‘Ay, I gets all that; but does thee not believe in anything, Professor lad?’ He deserved a temperate answer. Of course, some of the pragmatic mystics of ‘The Third Way’ may now think that my temperate reply is way-out, certainly a little ‘off-message’. We must wait and see. I am a democratic socialist.

Lastly, this book was written during the depths of the Cold War. Like most people I did not believe that the Soviet Communist system and its empire could collapse or wither away. But unlike some of my friends and students, I neither expected nor feared a Third World War. The atomic arsenals were unusable, the deterrents did deter, but the great tragedy was that they made the Iron Curtain seem indestructible and permanent. We might enjoy a kind of peace but only at the price of a war mentality,

inhuman misuse of scarce resources and an acceptance of the permanent unfreedom of others – as when the tanks moved into Budapest in 1956 and into Prague in 1968. Influenced by Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* I believed that once people got into that condition, there was little hope of change – at best, a dilution of totalitarianism into autocracy. The answer then became not to risk going that way at all, when and where choice was still possible. So I offered a defence of politics, not a pseudo-proof of its inevitability. But now, whatever happens to the countries of the former Soviet Union, and to China indeed, totalitarianism seems a faded relic of the mid-twentieth century, a perversion of modernism that ultimately failed, however much damage it did and left behind. The events of November 1989 in Eastern Europe showed a civic courage greater than anything seen since the Second World War, perhaps since the French Revolution or the uprisings against Britain and then Spain in the Americas. But, as in all revolutions, nothing went according to plan: there were unexpected consequences; expectations were aroused that could not be fulfilled; and the rest of the world was slow to grasp the full significance and opportunity of such events, and has failed to help with the skills and resources needed.

The price to be paid in terms of human suffering in times of transition can be greater than under some periods at least of the old oppression. The market determines prices but it does not solve, indeed can exacerbate, moral problems of distribution and the environment, ultimately of human survival. It must always be responded to and mediated by a democratic politics. So in 1992, after the fall of the Wall, I added 'A Final Footnote to Rally Those Who Grudge the Price', which contains some modifications of the more optimistic tone of the last chapter proper, 'In Praise of Politics', and I have now had to add an even darker Epilogue.

Alas, in one respect at least I have been too clever. Few noticed that, in the title of those footnotes, 'to rally' was an antique pun to convey a deliberate ambivalence. Stand fast, indeed; but when we lose self-irony, then dogmatism or even fanaticism takes over.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the first edition I spoke enigmatically of having 'bitten two of the hands that had fed me' at the LSE. I meant Harold Laski, socialist, and Michael Oakeshott, conservative. I did learn much from both. By the second edition I was aware how much in debt I had been to the late Carl Joachim Friedrich at Harvard and to the writings of Hannah Arendt. Ernest Gellner gave me stern and helpful criticism of my first draft, and my friends Dante Germino, Melvin Richter and the late Harold Swayze reacted to the first edition to help the second. Irene Coltman Brown's *Private Men and Public Causes: Philosophy and Politics in the English Civil War* (Faber, 1962) appeared at about the same time, and our letters crossed in the post saying how good we thought the other's book, how similar our basic argument, and that we didn't normally write to strangers. That is a good way to make a life-long friend and most helpful critic, such as has also been Dr Sally Jenkinson. Each of the Footnotes contains some reaction to criticism by good students at LSE, Sheffield and finally Birkbeck.

Some paragraphs in the 'Footnote to Rally Those Who Grudge the Price' have been adapted from my essay 'The High Price of Peace' in Hermann Giliomee and Jannie Gagiano (eds), *The Elusive Search for Peace: South Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town: 1990), and many friends and others in each of those countries have contributed to my change of tone from a qualified optimism to the

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

qualified pessimism of the Epilogue. My tone is much the same as that of J. M. Ross in his *Forward to Basics – Back from the Brink* (Pentland Press, 1999). Some paragraphs in the Epilogue draw on the last chapters in my *Essays on Citizenship* (Continuum, 2000). I thank Penguin Books for permission to quote passages from Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, in Rex Warner's fine translation (first published 1954). Lastly I thank Dr Francis Celoria for interrupting his labours on 'Folly' to help me with the proofs of the fourth edition.

Bernard Crick
Edinburgh, 4 July 2000

There are limits to everything. In all this time something definite should have been achieved. But it all turns out that those who inspired the revolution . . . aren't happy with anything that's on less than a world scale. For them transitional periods, worlds in the making, are an end in themselves. They aren't trained for anything else, they don't know anything except that. And do you know why these never-ending preparations are so futile? It's because these men haven't any real capacities, they are incompetent. Man is born to live not to prepare for life.

Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*

I immediately discerned within the Russian Revolution the seeds of such serious evils as intolerance and the drive towards the persecution of dissent. These evils originated in an absolute sense of the possession of truth grafted upon doctrinal rigidity. What followed was contempt for the man who was different, for his arguments and his way of life. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest problems each of us has to solve in the realm of practice is that of accepting the necessity to maintain, in the midst of the intransigence that comes from steadfast beliefs, a critical spirit towards these same beliefs and a respect for the belief that differs. In the struggle, it is the problem of combining the greatest practical efficiency with respect for the man in the enemy; in a word, of war without hate.

Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*

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1

The nature of political rule

Who has not often felt the distaste with democratic politics which Salazar expressed when he said that he 'detested politics from the bottom of his heart; all those noisy and incoherent promises, the impossible demands, the hotchpotch of unfounded ideas and impractical plans ... opportunism that cares neither for truth nor justice, the inglorious chase after unmerited fame, the unleashing of uncontrollable passions, the exploitation of the lowest instincts, the distortion of facts ... all that feverish and sterile fuss?'

J. H. Huizinga in *The Times*, 16 November 1961

Boredom with established truths is a great enemy of free men. So there is some excuse in troubled times not to be clever and inventive in redefining things, or to pretend to academic unconcern or scientific detachment, but simply to try to make some old platitudes pregnant. This essay simply seeks to help in the task of restoring confidence in the virtues of politics as a great and civilizing human activity. Politics, like Antaeus in the Greek myth, can remain perpetually young, strong, and lively so long as it can keep its feet firmly on the ground of Mother Earth. We live in a human condition, so we cannot through politics grasp for an absolute ideal, as Plato taught with bewitching single-mindedness. But the surface of the earth varies greatly, and being human we are restless and have many different ideals and are forced to plan for the future as well as to enjoy the fruits of the past, so equally politics cannot be a 'purely practical and immediate' activity, as those who cannot see beyond the end of their own noses praise themselves by claiming.

Politics is too often regarded as a poor relation, inherently dependent and subsidiary; it is rarely praised as something with a life and character

of its own. Politics is not religion, ethics, law, science, history, or economics; it neither solves everything, nor is it present everywhere; and it is not any one political doctrine, such as conservatism, liberalism, socialism, communism, or nationalism, though it can contain elements of most of these things. Politics is politics, to be valued as itself, not because it is 'like' or 'really is' something else more respectable or peculiar. Politics is politics. The person who wishes not to be troubled by politics and to be left alone finds himself the unwitting ally of those to whom politics is a troublesome obstacle to their well-meant intentions to leave nothing alone.

To some this may seem very obvious. But then there will be no harm in reminding them how few they are. All over the world there are men aspiring to power and there are actual rulers who, however many different names they go by, have in common a rejection of politics. Many Frenchmen in 1958, warm defenders of the Republic, argued that General de Gaulle was saving the French nation from the politicians; in 1961 an army rebellion broke out in Algeria in which the same General was then accused of seeking a 'purely political solution' to the Algerian problem, and the rebel Generals went on to deny that they themselves had any 'political ambitions'. Fidel Castro told a reporter in 1961: 'We are not politicians. We made our revolution to get the politicians out. We are social people. This is a social revolution.' In so many places the cry has gone up that *the* party or *the* leader is defending *the* people against the politicians. 'Politics, ill understood, have been defined,' wrote Isaac D'Israeli, 'as "the art of governing mankind by deceiving them"'. Many people, of course, even in régimes which are clearly political, think that they are not interested in politics, and even act as if they are not; but they are probably few compared to the many who think that politics is muddled, contradictory, self-defeatingly recurrent, unprogressive, unpatriotic, inefficient, mere compromise, or even a sham or conspiracy by which political parties seek to preserve some particular and peculiar social systems against the challenge of the inevitable future, etc. The anti-political are very right to think that politics is an achievement far more limited in time and place than politically-minded men, or men who practise this odd thing politics, normally presume.

Many politicians, publicists, and scholars in Western cultures are apt to leap to the defence, or the propagandizing, of words like 'liberty', 'democracy', 'free-government', and then to be puzzled and distraught when, even if their voices are heard at all elsewhere, they are only

answered by proud and sincere assurances that indeed all these good things exist and are honoured in styles of government as different as my Soviet Union, my China, my Spain, my Egypt, my Cuba, my Ghana, my Northern Ireland, or my South Africa. Even if precise meanings can be attached to these words, they are too important as symbols of prestige to be readily conceded. Publicists would perhaps do better simply to defend the activity of politics itself. For it is a very much more precise thing than is commonly supposed; it is essential to genuine freedom; it is unknown in any but advanced and complex societies; and it has specific origins only found in European experience. It is something to be valued almost as a pearl beyond price in the history of the human condition, though, in fact, to overvalue it can be to destroy it utterly.

Perhaps there is something to be said for writing in praise of an activity which seems so general that few people can feel any great passion to appropriate it, or to nationalize it, as the exclusive property of any one group of men or of any particular programme of government.

It is Aristotle who first states what should be recognized as the fundamental, elementary proposition of any possible political science. He is, as it were, the anthropologist who first characterizes and distinguishes what still appears to be a unique invention or discovery of the Greek world. At one point in the second book of his *Politics*, where he examines and criticizes schemes for ideal states, he says that Plato in his *Republic* makes the mistake of trying to reduce everything in the *polis* (or the political type of state) to a unity; rather it is the case that: 'there is a point at which a *polis*, by advancing in unity, will cease to be a *polis*: there is another point, short of that, at which it may still remain a *polis*, but will none the less come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse *polis*. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the *polis* is an aggregate of many members.'¹ Politics arises then, according to great Aristotle, in organized states which recognize themselves to be an aggregate of many members, not a single tribe, religion, interest, or tradition. Politics arises from accepting the fact of the simultaneous existence of different groups, hence different interests and different traditions, within a territorial unit under a common rule. It does not matter much how that unit came to be – by custom, conquest, or geographical circumstance. What does matter is

.1. *Politics of Aristotle*, edited by Sir Ernest Barker, p. 51.

that its social structure, unlike some primitive societies, is sufficiently complex and divided to make politics a plausible response to the problem of governing it, the problem of maintaining order at all. But the establishing of political order is not just any order at all; it marks the birth, or the recognition, of freedom. For politics represents at least some tolerance of differing truths, some recognition that government is possible, indeed best conducted, amid the open canvassing of rival interests. Politics are the public actions of free men. Freedom is the privacy of men from public actions.

Common usage of the word might encourage one to think that politics is a real force in every organized state. But a moment's reflection should reveal that this common usage can be highly misleading. For politics, as Aristotle points out, is only one possible solution to the problem of order. It is by no means the most usual. Tyranny is the most obvious alternative – the rule of one strong man in his own interest; and oligarchy is the next most obvious alternative – the rule of one group in their own interest. The method of rule of the tyrant and the oligarch is quite simply to clobber, coerce, or overawe all or most of these other groups in the interest of their own. The political method of rule is to listen to these other groups so as to conciliate them as far as possible, and to give them a legal position, a sense of security, some clear and reasonably safe means of articulation, by which these other groups can and will speak freely. Ideally politics draws all these groups into each other so that they each and together can make a positive contribution towards the general business of government, the maintaining of order. The different ways in which this can be done are obviously many, even in any one particular circumstance of competing social interests; and in view of the many different states and changes of circumstance there have been, are, and will be, possible variations on the theme of political rule appear to be infinite. But, however imperfectly this process of deliberate conciliation works, it is nevertheless radically different from tyranny, oligarchy, kingship, dictatorship, despotism, and – what is probably the only distinctively modern type of rule – totalitarianism.

Certainly it may sometimes seem odd, in the light of contemporary usage, to say that there is no politics in totalitarian or tyrannical régimes. To some it would be clearer to assert that while there is plainly some politics in all systems of government, yet some systems of government are themselves political systems: they function by or for politics. But usage does not destroy real distinctions. And this distinction has a great

tradition behind it.¹ When Chief Justice Fortescue in the mid fifteenth century said that England was both *dominium politicum et regale*, he meant that the King could declare law only by the consultation and consent of Parliament, although he was absolute in power to enforce the law and to defend the realm. But a régime purely *regale* or royal would not be *politicum* at all. In the early modern period 'polity' or 'mixed government', that is the Aristotelean blending of the aristocratic with the democratic principle, were terms commonly used in contrast both to tyranny or despotism and to 'democracy' – even when democracy was just a speculative fear, or a theoretical extension of what might happen if all men acted like the Anabaptists or the Levellers. In the eighteenth century in England 'politics' was commonly contrasted to the principle of 'establishment'. Politicians were people who challenged the established order of Crown, Court, and Church; and they challenged it in a peculiar way, not by the Palace intrigues of despotism, but by trying to create clear issues of policy *and* by making them public. Politicians were people, whether highminded like Pitt the Elder, or low-minded like Jack Wilkes, who tried to assert the power of 'the public' and 'the people' (in reality, of course, always publics and peoples) against what Dr Johnson called 'the powers by law established'. The term was pejorative. The Tory squires called the Whig magnates 'politicians' because they enlisted the help of people like Wilkes; and the 'big Whigs' themselves regarded people like Wilkes as politicians because he made use of 'the mob', or rather the skilled urban workers. So being political in fact usually meant recognizing a wider 'constituency', than did the powers-that-be of the moment, whom it was felt to be necessary to consult if government was to be effectively conducted, not in the past, but in the present which was the emerging future.

So in trying to understand the many forms of government that there are, of which political rule is only one, it is particularly easy to mistake rhetoric for theory. To say that all governing involves politics is either rhetoric or muddle. Why call, for instance, a struggle for power 'politics' when it is simply a struggle for power? Two or more factions within a single party, or the clients of two great men, struggle for a monopoly of power: there may be no political or constitutional procedures whatever to contain this struggle, or powerful enough to do so, and the contestants

1. See further 'Semantic Digression' in the first Appendix.

will regard any compromise as a pure tactic or breathing-space on the way to the complete victory of one faction and the suppression of the other. Certainly there is a sense in which, even in a tyranny or totalitarian régime, politics exists up to the moment when the ruler finds himself free to act alone. While he is not free to act alone, while he is forced to consult other people whom he regards as his enemies, either through necessity or through a temporary ignorance of their real power, he is in some kind of a political relationship. But it is essentially fragile and unwanted. The ruler will not, nor may anyone else, regard it as normal, even if it could be shown that it is perennial. Politics is then regarded simply as an obstacle – and, in a sense, it is an obstacle, but it may not be an at all secure or effective one. Some politics may exist in unfree régimes, but it is unwanted – a measure to their rulers of inadequate progress towards unity; and every effort will be made to keep such disputes secret from the ruled, to prevent the formation of a ‘public’. For Palace politics is private politics, almost a contradiction in terms. The unique character of political activity lies, quite literally, in its publicity.

There is no need, then, to deny that elements of politics can exist in tyrannical and other régimes – rather the contrary. Sophocles makes this point in the *Antigone*:

CREON: Then she is not breaking the law?

HAEMON: Your fellow-citizens would deny it, to a man.

CREON: And the *polis* proposes to teach me how to rule?

HAEMON: Ah. Who is it that’s talking like a boy now?

CREON: Can any voice but mine give orders in this *polis*?

HAEMON: It is no *polis* if it takes orders from one voice.

CREON: But custom gives possession to the ruler.

HAEMON: You’d rule a desert beautifully alone.

Suppose I had made my point less strongly by rendering *polis* as simply ‘city’; we would still see a word being contested for by two different theories of government – call it ‘civil society’ or ‘political society’. Both claim that their theory is inherent in the concept – the primacy of autocracy or citizenship respectively. And which is the more realistic? The great hope for the political way of Haemon is that it is, in the long run, a more workable way of maintaining order than the one Creon chose or stuck to. Politics thus arises from a recognition of restraints. The character of this recognition may be moral, but more often it is simply