

# Thoughts on the Present Discontents, and Speeches

by Edmund Burke

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## INTRODUCTION

Edmund Burke was born at Dublin on the first of January, 1730. His father was an attorney, who had fifteen children, of whom all but four died in their youth. Edmund, the second son, being of delicate health in his childhood, was taught at home and at his grandfather's house in the country before he was sent with his two brothers Garrett and Richard to a school at Ballitore, under Abraham Shackleton, a member of the Society of Friends. For nearly forty years afterwards Burke paid an annual visit to Ballitore.

In 1744, after leaving school, Burke entered Trinity College, Dublin. He graduated B.A. in 1748; M.A., 1751. In 1750 he came to London, to the Middle Temple. In 1756 Burke became known as a writer, by two pieces.

One was a pamphlet called "A Vindication of Natural Society." This was an ironical piece, reducing to absurdity those theories of the excellence of uncivilised humanity which were gathering strength in France, and had been favoured in the philosophical works of Bolingbroke, then lately published. Burke's other work published in 1756, was his "Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful."

At this time Burke's health broke down. He was cared for in the house of a kindly physician, Dr. Nugent, and the result was that in the spring of 1757 he married Dr. Nugent's daughter. In the following year Burke made Samuel Johnson's acquaintance, and acquaintance ripened fast into close friendship. In 1758, also, a son was born; and, as a way of adding to his income, Burke suggested the plan of "The Annual Register."

In 1761 Burke became private secretary to William Gerard Hamilton, who was then appointed Chief Secretary to Ireland. In April, 1763, Burke's services were recognised by a pension of 300 pounds a year; but he threw this up in April, 1765, when he found that his services were considered to have been not only recognised, but also bought. On the 10th of July in that year (1765) Lord Rockingham became Premier, and a week later Burke, through the good offices of an admiring friend who had come to know him in the newly-founded Turk's Head Club, became Rockingham's private secretary. He was now the mainstay, if not the inspirer, of Rockingham's policy of pacific compromise in the vexed questions between England and the American colonies. Burke's elder brother, who had lately succeeded to his father's property, died also in 1765, and Burke sold the estate in Cork for 4,000 pounds.

Having become private secretary to Lord Rockingham, Burke entered Parliament as member for Wendover, and promptly took his place among the leading speakers in the House.

On the 30th of July, 1766, the Rockingham Ministry went out, and Burke wrote a defence of its policy in "A Short Account of a late Short Administration." In 1768 Burke bought for 23,000 pounds an estate called Gregories or Butler's Court, about a mile from Beaconsfield. He called it by the more territorial name of Beaconsfield, and made it his home. Burke's endeavours to stay the policy that was driving the American colonies to revolution, caused the State of New York, in 1771, to nominate him as its agent. About May, 1769, Edmund Burke began the pamphlet here given, Thoughts on the Present Discontents. It was published in 1770, and four editions of it were issued before the end of the year. It was directed chiefly

against Court influence, that had first been used successfully against the Rockingham Ministry. Allegiance to Rockingham caused Burke to write the pamphlet, but he based his argument upon essentials of his own faith as a statesman. It was the beginning of the larger utterance of his political mind.

Court influence was strengthened in those days by the large number of newly-rich men, who bought their way into the House of Commons for personal reasons and could easily be attached to the King's party. In a population of 8,000,000 there were then but 160,000 electors, mostly nominal. The great land-owners generally held the counties. When two great houses disputed the county of York, the election lasted fourteen days, and the costs, chiefly in bribery, were said to have reached three hundred thousand pounds. Many seats in Parliament were regarded as hereditary possessions, which

could be let at rental, or to which the nominations could be sold. Town corporations often let, to the highest bidders, seats in Parliament, for the benefit of the town funds. The election of John Wilkes for Middlesex, in 1768, was taken as a triumph of the people. The King and his ministers then brought the House of Commons into conflict with the freeholders of Westminster. Discontent became active and general. "Junius" began, in his letters, to attack boldly the King's friends, and into the midst of the discontent was thrown a message from the Crown asking for half a million, to make good a shortcoming in the Civil List. Men asked in vain what had been done with the lost money. Confusion at home was increased by the great conflict with the American colonies; discontents, ever present, were colonial as well as home. In such a time Burke endeavoured to show by what pilotage he would have men weather the storm.

H. M.

## THOUGHTS ON THE PRESENT DISCONTENTS

It is an undertaking of some degree of delicacy to examine into the cause of public disorders. If a man happens not to succeed in such an inquiry, he will be thought weak and visionary; if he touches the true grievance, there is a danger that he may come near to persons of weight and consequence, who will rather be exasperated at the discovery of their errors than thankful for the occasion of correcting them. If he should be obliged to blame the favourites of the people, he will be considered as the tool of power; if he censures those in power, he will be looked on as an instrument of faction. But in all exertions of duty something is to be hazarded. In cases of tumult and disorder, our law has invested every man, in some sort, with the authority of a magistrate. When the affairs of

the nation are distracted, private people are, by the spirit of that law, justified in stepping a little out of their ordinary sphere. They enjoy a privilege of somewhat more dignity and effect than that of idle lamentation over the calamities of their country. They may look into them narrowly; they may reason upon them liberally; and if they should be so fortunate as to discover the true source of the mischief, and to suggest any probable method of removing it, though they may displease the rulers for the day, they are certainly of service to the cause of Government. Government is deeply interested in everything which, even through the medium of some temporary uneasiness, may tend finally to compose the minds of the subjects, and to conciliate their affections. I have nothing to do here with the abstract value of the voice of the people. But as long as reputation, the most precious possession of every individual, and as long as opinion, the great support of the State, depend entirely

upon that voice, it can never be considered as a thing of little consequence either to individuals or to Government. Nations are not primarily ruled by laws; less by violence. Whatever original energy may be supposed either in force or regulation, the operation of both is, in truth, merely instrumental. Nations are governed by the same methods, and on the same principles, by which an individual without authority is often able to govern those who are his equals or his superiors, by a knowledge of their temper, and by a judicious management of it; I mean, when public affairs are steadily and quietly conducted: not when Government is nothing but a continued scuffle between the magistrate and the multitude, in which sometimes the one and sometimes the other is uppermost--in which they alternately yield and prevail, in a series of contemptible victories and scandalous submissions. The temper of the people amongst whom he presides ought therefore to be the first study of a statesman. And the knowledge of this

temper it is by no means impossible for him to attain, if he has not an interest in being ignorant of what it is his duty to learn.

To complain of the age we live in, to murmur at the present possessors of power, to lament the past, to conceive extravagant hopes of the future, are the common dispositions of the greater part of mankind--indeed, the necessary effects of the ignorance and levity of the vulgar. Such complaints and humours have existed in all times; yet as all times have NOT been alike, true political sagacity manifests itself, in distinguishing that complaint which only characterises the general infirmity of human nature from those which are symptoms of the particular distemperature of our own air and season.

Nobody, I believe, will consider it merely as the language of spleen or disappointment, if I say that there is

something particularly alarming in the present conjuncture. There is hardly a man, in or out of power, who holds any other language. That Government is at once dreaded and contemned; that the laws are despoiled of all their respected and salutary terrors; that their inaction is a subject of ridicule, and their exertion of abhorrence; that rank, and office, and title, and all the solemn plausibilities of the world, have lost their reverence and effect; that our foreign politics are as much deranged as our domestic economy; that our dependencies are slackened in their affection, and loosened from their obedience; that we know neither how to yield nor how to enforce; that hardly anything above or below, abroad or at home, is sound and entire; but that disconnection and confusion, in offices, in parties, in families, in Parliament, in the nation, prevail beyond the disorders of any former time: these are facts universally admitted and lamented.

This state of things is the more extraordinary, because the great parties which formerly divided and agitated the kingdom are known to be in a manner entirely dissolved. No great external calamity has visited the nation; no pestilence or famine. We do not labour at present under any scheme of taxation new or oppressive in the quantity or in the mode. Nor are we engaged in unsuccessful war, in which our misfortunes might easily pervert our judgment, and our minds, sore from the loss of national glory, might feel every blow of fortune as a crime in Government.

It is impossible that the cause of this strange distemper should not sometimes become a subject of discourse. It is a compliment due, and which I willingly pay, to those who administer our affairs, to take notice in the first place of their speculation. Our Ministers are of opinion that the increase of our trade and manufactures, that our

growth by colonisation and by conquest, have concurred to accumulate immense wealth in the hands of some individuals; and this again being dispersed amongst the people, has rendered them universally proud, ferocious, and ungovernable; that the insolence of some from their enormous wealth, and the boldness of others from a guilty poverty, have rendered them capable of the most atrocious attempts; so that they have trampled upon all subordination, and violently borne down the unarmed laws of a free Government--barriers too feeble against the fury of a populace so fierce and licentious as ours. They contend that no adequate provocation has been given for so spreading a discontent, our affairs having been conducted throughout with remarkable temper and consummate wisdom. The wicked industry of some libellers, joined to the intrigues of a few disappointed politicians, have, in their opinion, been able to produce this unnatural ferment in the nation.

Nothing indeed can be more unnatural than the present convulsions of this country, if the above account be a true one. I confess I shall assent to it with great reluctance, and only on the compulsion of the clearest and firmest proofs; because their account resolves itself into this short but discouraging proposition, "That we have a very good Ministry, but that we are a very bad people;" that we set ourselves to bite the hand that feeds us; that with a malignant insanity we oppose the measures, and ungratefully vilify the persons, of those whose sole object is our own peace and prosperity. If a few puny libellers, acting under a knot of factious politicians, without virtue, parts, or character (such they are constantly represented by these gentlemen), are sufficient to excite this disturbance, very perverse must be the disposition of that people amongst whom such a disturbance can be excited by such means. It is besides no small aggravation of the public