

## Practical Politics and Civic Righteousness

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I wish, if possible, to set before you a clear vivid picture of that influence in our civic life today which has come to be spoken of under the name of practical politics. Still more I wish to point out the relation of practical politics and the practical politician of practical politics to our civic life. How much havoc has been wrought in our public life by the insidious influence of the practical politician, and how damaging will be the results upon the generations that are before us only time can tell. It is sufficient to know that today, under the blanket excuse of the pressing necessity of practical politics, we tolerate practices that make the flush of shame rush to the cheeks of any decent man. When we are talking of this question of practical politics and the relation of the same to [the] common interests of the community, I am not holding up my hands in holy horror at the wickedness of some far off den of iniquity like New York or Chicago. They are bad enough, God knows, nor am I referring to specific things anywhere, however bad and vicious they may be. What I am referring to is the general attitude of mind which is altogether to apparent in our public life, and from the evil influences of which we have not escaped in this city.

In order to understand the meaning and the significance of this vicious practice of practical politics, it is necessary to consider some of the elementary principles involved in a democratic form of government.

In the old New England town meeting you get about as close as you can to first principles in the nature of government. Here are a certain number of people who live within a certain geographical radius. They have certain common interests, like the maintaining of a school or roads. They meet to consider what may be done, and they appoint certain of their number who seem

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908.

to them to be qualified, to do the things which they wish done, to look out for the common interests. Now a number of these small towns find that aside from those interests, which affect them specifically within the limits of the town in which they live, they have a larger range of interests which they share in common with all the towns. It is not practical for them to meet directly in a common council as they do in their town meeting, so they choose delegates to represent them in the council of the delegates of these various towns, as for example in the Great and General Court in this state. But still wider is the common interests of the states for the planning and the execution of which we send our various representatives. Inasmuch as all this work which we are asking these men to do requires time and effort, we set aside a sum of money with which to pay them. They are our delegated representatives into whose hands we have entrusted the care and the promotion of our common interests. We do not ask that their judgement shall be infallible, we do not ask that they shall be free from errors. All we ask is that their purpose shall be clean, that they shall stick to their job of attending to the interests which we have in common with the other states similar to ours. There is one aspect of this relationship in government, to which I wish to call your attention. The national government is not a public crib or trough out of which we as a state are to get as much as we can. It is an organization for protecting and promoting, not our own interests particularly, but the interests of all the states in common. Into this work we put the intellectual, executive, and the financial support necessary to carry out our common purpose.

Now just a word as to what that common purpose is. That was once stated in the preamble to a document which we call the constitution. In spite of its strange sounding ideas, it is still worth repeating, if for no other reason than to show what our forefathers had in mind, when this democracy was begun.

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.

Such is the nature of our government, and such is the purpose for which it is instituted. In the light of these two ideas, I wish to place before you for your contemplation the fact and the nature of what we have come to call practical politics, and that loathsome worm, the practical politician, and the relation of the same to civic righteousness.

Now civic righteousness is not to be regarded as any especially pious or long-faced, solemn and sanctimonious, air with which we go about the performance of those duties that fall to us a citizens in the community. Nor is civic righteousness to be regarded as any aethereal far-off dream of the condition in centuries to come. It does not demand of a man that he shall hold to any particular policy so far as the method of attaining the common ends of society is concerned. It does not demand that a man's judgement shall be absolutely right and correct. It does not demand that we shall be living in a world of saints in order to be true to the principles of civic righteousness. In fact the first principle of civic righteousness is the recognition of the plain stern facts of the physical and the social conditions under which we live. We must learn to see the philosophy as well as the humor of Jenkin Lloyd Jones' famous remark, "Heaven may be my home, but Chicago is my place of residence."<sup>2</sup> Civic righteousness demands this and this alone, that, in the performance of those duties which fall upon us because of our relationships to each other in the social order, we shall hold steadfastly to the one fundamental principle that the government is maintained to protect and to promote the common welfare. A man may be in error of judgement as to the line of action that may best promote the protection and the enhancement of the public welfare, but he must not be in a position that violates the honest and the integrity of his purpose.

The phrase, "Practical Politics," has come to be applied to that practice in our civic life which violates the integrity of civic purpose. The phrase, "the practical politician," has come to be applied to those engaged in the affairs of the state, who employ the methods of practical politics. I wish to speak of these under three classifications. First, referring to those practical politicians, who for reasons of personal ease, or

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<sup>2</sup> Jenkin Lloyd Jones (1843-1918) Unitarian minister, founder of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Chicago. I cannot find the source for this quote.

business interests keep their lips sealed upon all questions that effect the public welfare, and become merely negative quantities so far as any activities are concerned. It may seem far-fetched to classify among the practical politicians this type of a citizen. But let us inquire as to his relations to the community. There are many of this type who say, "I will not soil my hands with the dirty politics." or "My business interests demand that I must keep out of all questions involved in political affairs. If I became mixed up in such questions, or let my opinions be known, it would be detrimental to the prosperity of my business."

Now let us see just what this means. Here is a man who is conducting some line of business in the city. In the long run, he knows that his success in the field in which he is working depends upon the general welfare of the community, and the extent to which a fairly high standard of public life is concerned. He knows, for example, that the condition of the public schools, of the streets, of the water works, of the sanitary arrangements and the sanitary conditions of the city, determine in a large measure the general welfare of the city. He knows also that, as a resident and citizen of the city, he should devote his share of the time and thought required to develop a rational and enlightened public opinion as to the care and the maintenance of these public concerns. Yet, in the face of these apparent duties, what does this close-mouthed, non-active citizen say to us by his silence? He says, "I realize the necessity of the care and the maintenance of these public utilities, and I realize that the welfare of the community, and of myself as a citizen and businessman depends upon the extent to which a high standard of efficiency in these common interests are maintained, and I hope that they will be maintained at a high standard, but in the meantime, in order that I may squeeze out the largest amount of profits for my own particular business and my own particular welfare, I find that it is expedient for me to refrain from doing my share in this common work. Of course I want my property rights protected, and my person and my family protected and well supplied by the public utilities, but I do not care to contribute to that end." If you stop to think of it, you will see that this type of a man is very closely related to that variety of humanity which, in the cellar of society, is known as a "panhandler," the man who thinks that society owes him a living whether he is willing to work for it or not. This type of a Practical Politician is nothing more or less than a

social pauper who asks the alms of protection, and gives nothing in return, unless it be his taxes, and he makes this contribution in much the same spirit as the panhandler does who happens to stumble upon someone who gives him the opportunity of earning his breakfast. It is difficult to estimate the amount of evil that we suffer from this type of the practical politician, who gains his ends by negative methods.

But we pass now to the consideration of the second classification of the practical politician, and his practical politics. Here we come across that type whose purpose may be regarded as satisfactory. They are interested in the public welfare, and while there may be room for a difference of opinion as to what that public welfare demands, there is no reason to doubt their interest. But in their zeal, they are not particular as to the methods that they employ. They take advantage of the weaknesses and the grim necessities of voters in order to enhance their program for the public welfare. They are not content to rely upon argument and conviction, but buy votes, threaten, make use of political patronage, and unworthy appeals to the end that they may feel the more assured that the public welfare will be maintained. They forget that the methods which they are using for the purpose of assuring the public welfare are such that they are, as a matter of fact, destroying it much more rapidly than the most sagacious and statesman-like program can ever hope to upbuild it. The welfare, the integrity, and the continuance of this democracy depends not so much upon the realization of any program, as it does upon the free, unbiased, and intelligent vote cast by the rank and the file of the great mass of people. Bribery, political patronage, and economic coercion are real and threatening dangers to our future, regardless of the ends for which they are used.

Under this head also should come the consideration of partisanship to the public welfare. It should be noted that the permanent and abiding thing is the public welfare. Political history, not only here but in all lands, shows that the rise and the passing of political parties are but transitory phenomena. A political party has its origin in the presentation to the public of a principle in the interests of the public welfare. If that principle, for which the developing party stands, appeals to the mass of people the chances are that the party will come into power, and thus establish the principle in our common life. When that principle has been established, the party that promoted it,

unless it has new principles to present, will die the natural death of an organization that is no longer needed. There is nothing in the origin or the nature of a political party that constitutes any claim on the supporter of that party. All this rhetoric of appeal to loyalty to a party is just so much tomfoolery. The question as to one's relationship to a party is determined upon quite other grounds. A political party is more or less [a] temporary organization, ostensibly working for the public welfare along the line of certain general principles. The voters relationship to a party is determined by whether or not the principles and the purposes of the party and the men who are to put in operation those principles will, to his mind, tend toward the public welfare. Partisanship of a certain kind is an inherent necessity, unless you assume that there will come a time when all men shall be of one mind. I hope that time will never come, for it would take away half the fun of life. Into the party whose purposes and principles are nearest your own, you should go. When you do that you are doing right. Stay there as long as you can for the same reasons. When you come to a point where the party principles have changed, as change they must, and you can no longer accept them, or your own principles change, the only thing to do is to change your party affiliation. The partisanship that will sacrifice the public welfare for its own power and influence is a most reprehensible aspect of practical politicians, and their methods.

We come now to the last type of the practical politician. He is that person who deliberately makes use of the machinery and institutions of the public welfare for the purpose of enhancing his own interests at the expense of the public interests. He ranges all the way from the man who seeks office, or make use of the political official, to secure some special favor by which he will profit and the general public will suffer loss; up through the man who seeks public office for the purpose of selling his vote and his influence to the highest bidder, to the person or the corporation that deliberately debases the public institutions for its own greed and strength. To what extent this is done, it is exceedingly difficult to determine, for the work is of such a character that it must of necessity be done in the dark and under cover. We have had two or three glaring examples brought to our attention within the last month. The relations of

the Standard Oil Company with the United States<sup>3</sup>, and with the Courts of Justice in Pennsylvania, to speak only of well-known cases, have been such as to make even the most optimistic of the students of public life shudder at the thoughts of the extent to which our sense of public honor has been undermined, and our public morality endangered. All the money that the heads of such an organization can give to the support of churches and institutions of education and causes of missions cannot for one moment make amends of the vicious and demoralizing influence which it has exerted over our public institutions. The excessive fortunes are a small part of the goods that the captains of industry have deprived us of in the last 25 years. They have destroyed our government and debased our system of justice, and last but not least, they have lowered the physical and moral standards of living, and they have tried to betray, if they have not succeeded in betraying, the essential character of our national democracy. It may be, too, that they have so debased our institutions that consequences of a very serious nature may result. The plots and the deeds of violence by all the anarchists of the country do not begin to measure up the evil results of the practical politics of industrial greed.

I fear that we do not have to go so far away as the Standard Oil Company and the Courts of Pennsylvania to find, in one form or another, this dastardly practice making use of and debasing public institutions for purposes and aggrandizement and gain. Indeed, it has almost become a political principle. I cannot affirm that such practices exist in this community, for I have not the evidence, but I think it safe to say that we are not above suspicion. Remember that the spatterings of such suspicion rest upon us all.

Just for a moment, consider the nature of such practical politics, and such practical politicians. They come before the voters and ask for support on the ground of the service that they will render to the common welfare. They come in the guise of public servants. All the while they know that the interest in the public welfare is at best of only secondary importance to them. While they have been appearing before you in the open,

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<sup>3</sup> Davis may be referring to that were brought to the public by Ida M. Tarbell (1857-1944) in *McClure's Magazine* between 1902 and 1904, one of the first "muckraking" pieces of journals from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

declaring to you their interest in the common welfare, they have in secret been placing themselves under obligations to special interests, and, for some kind of a price or another, have sold themselves and betrayed your confidence in their integrity as public servants. You see very clearly the kind of a snake in the grass that they are. Like the man who would accept the hospitality, yes beg the hospitality, of your home, and secretly murder your children, while under your roof. These are the men who we should fear, and these are the practices that are undermining the very fabric of our national honor, and our individual integrity. Let me quote you a poem that was called to my attention recently.

In storied Venice, down whose rippling streets  
The stars go hurrying, and the white moon beats,  
Stood the great Bell Tower, fronting seas and skies—  
Fronting the ages, drawing all men's eyes;  
Rooted like Tenerife, aloft and proud  
Taunting the lightning, tearing the flying cloud.

It marked the hours for Venice; all men said  
Time cannot reach to bow that lofty head;  
Time, that shall touch all else with ruin, must  
Forbear to make this shaft confess its dust,  
Yet all the while, in secret, without sound,  
The fat worms gnawed the timbers underground.

The twisting worm, whose epoch is an hour,  
Caverned its way into the might tower;  
And suddenly it shook, it swayed, it broke,  
And fell in darkening thunder at one stroke.  
The strong shaft with an angel on the crown,  
Fell ruining; a thousand years went down!

And so I fear, my country, not the hand  
That shall hurl night and whirlwind on the land;  
I fear not Titan traitors who shall rise  
To stride the Brocken shadows on our skies—  
Not giants who shall come to overthrow  
And send on earth an Iliad of woe.

I fear the vermin that shall undermine  
Senate and citadel and school and shrine—  
The Worm of Greed, the fatted Worm of Ease,



And all the crawling progeny of these—  
The vermin that shall honeycomb the towers  
And walls of state in unsuspecting hours.<sup>4</sup>

That is why I have spoken to you today upon this subject. This government of ours, this ideal of a democracy embodies a great principle. It is of more value to humanity that the principles of honor and integrity should be maintained in our national life, than that we should witness a great commercial and industrial progress, purchased at the expense [of] human degradation and national debasement. This is the great melting pot of the world. Into it are being poured peoples and ideals from all the nations of the world. When the dross shall have been burned away, and the purified metal of humanity shall have emerged from the smelter of human experience, we shall witness the splendor of a more glorious life than man has yet dreamed. I appeal to you as makers of public opinion, as molders of the nation's destiny, to reassert once more those simple and elementary principles of civic righteousness, which recognize a common duty and a common purpose in all the relations of citizens. Let your own conduct be above reproach, and let your voice never cease from declaring the inviolability, the high standards of conduct that bind us together in a small community and in a great nation. Our opinions must differ, but our purpose never shall swerve one hair's breadth from the common interests of our common welfare. Our judgement may be in error, and our methods may prove to be wrong, but never let [the] nature of the one great purpose become obscured or blurred.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Markham (1852-1940) American poet, was poet Laureate of Oregon from 1923 to 1931. This is his poem, "The Menace of the Tower," first published in *The Independent*, 1903, p. 1568.