

ON DEFENDING POLITICS

Michael W. Spicer*

Defending politics nowadays might seem a daunting task since politics and politicians are not especially popular and, in fact, political candidates for elected office make great play of their desire to take politics out of government. They would have us make government run more like a business or, alternatively, more like a family or even a church. Similarly, many commentators nowadays complain about what they see as heightened political rancor and deadlock within our allegedly broken political system. Depending on their political point of view, they warn us of the perils raised by harsh and divisive rhetoric of the Tea Party on the one hand or the antics and yelling of the Occupy Wall Street movement on the other.

However, when we consider the numerous failed states all around the world, such antipathy towards politics seems a rather silly, if not an outright dangerous sentiment. Certainly, we find in politics the usual vices that we see elsewhere in much of human behavior: greed, avarice, pride, vanity, envy, lust, and so forth. However, we should remember that politics is also productive of certain virtues. Not the least among these is that politics can help us to keep the peace by limiting the use of violence among us in resolving our differences. Whatever its vices, politics as a practice, for example, has enabled us in the United States, despite the Great Depression and enduring racial strife, to avoid a second civil war for a century and a half or so. The horrific events of human suffering and violence seen in Darfur, the Congo, and elsewhere serve to remind us that politics is a precious, but also very fragile, human achievement and one not lightly to be put aside. Politics provides us with a means of settling, at least for a time, the inevitable conflicts of interests and values or conceptions of the good that arise among us

without having constantly to take up arms against each other. Politics, as the late Bernard Crick once reminded us, is “a way of ruling divided societies without undue violence.”

Moreover, politics encourages our political leaders, as well as the public officials who serve them, to respond to the varied and conflicting views of different groups of citizens in our society. In doing so, politics, while it cannot guarantee, makes it at least more likely that the actions of public officials will reflect the many different values or conceptions of the good that we as human beings seem capable of imagining. Furthermore, because politics involves the settling of our differences by methods of conciliation rather than force or violence, politics also encourages the negotiation of certain rights and privileges by individuals and groups so that they are freer to go about their lives pursuing their own particular values or conceptions of the good without governmental interference. Without the opportunity for citizens to engage in politics, freedom ends up being dependent on little more than the good will of our governors and, as we have seen on repeated occasions in our history, such good will is a thin reed to be relied upon.

In light of these obvious virtues of politics, one might think that academics would be more sympathetic than the public at large to the practice of politics. However, my experience has often been precisely the opposite; namely, that many of my academic colleagues share many of the same anti-political sentiments held by citizens in general and that they are, if anything, even more forceful in voicing these sentiments. One of our leading writers in my own field of public administration, for example, has complained about the failure of our political system to “resolve goal conflict with informed public policy” and has argued that what American public administration and governance needs today is “less democracy and more bureaucracy.” This antipathy toward politics, when expressed by academics, is unfortunate because it can rub off on our students, who go on to hold powerful positions in government leadership within in our

society. The danger here is that the public officials we help educate and advise might actually believe what we often tell them and come to see politics as something unwholesome, something to be avoided, and begin to see themselves as somehow superior to, or above politics.

One reason for this antipathy towards politics on the part of academics is that many still remain infatuated with the idea of a science of governance. Like the eighteenth-century French philosopher Saint Simon before them, they often look longingly to the methods and techniques of social science as a way to avoid or at least bridle the conflicts, the messy compromises, and uncertainties that are characteristic of politics as we have come to know it. However, notwithstanding the many virtues of social science, a scientific approach to governance is always potentially problematic because it downplays the conflicting ends and values as well as the freedom and resulting sheer unpredictability that we have come to experience as part and parcel of our own tradition of politics.

My suggested remedy for these problems is admittedly a modest one. It is simply that we academics understand and embrace the idea of *audi alteram partem* or “hear the other side” and the political and social practices that help foster this ideal. We need to recognize that it is our own historically situated and admittedly sometimes shabby practices of politics, rather than a science of governance, that will help us to resolve conflicts among our rival interests and conceptions of the good in a non-violent fashion because it is these practices that provide us with multiple opportunities for adversary argument or hearing the other side. This is not to claim that our political practices are perfect but rather to suggest that any alleged defects in these practices, like the many other issues we face, are something we can and ought to argue about.

Finally, we academics would do well to educate our students, especially those who wish to enter public service, in the disciplines of law, literature, and history. Law is helpful because it provides an appreciation for the virtues of adversary argument and shows how honest and reasonable people can often disagree on an issue and judge differently. Literature and history can extend our imaginations by allowing us to conceive of human beings with values or conceptions of the good, some of which are familiar, some of which are strange and some of which conflict with those that we happen to hold. Also, studying law, literature, and history draws our attention to human conflict in concrete situations and serves to remind us that conflict is not a vice or defect or aberration but is rather perfectly normal and that there is virtue in seeking to resolve such conflict by practices of adversarial argument rather than by force or violence. Understanding the normality of conflict in this way can make it more likely that we Americans, instead of going to war with each other, will continue to argue loudly and vigorously about our competing interests and conceptions of the goods, while at the same time embracing rather than disparaging our practices of politics.

* Michael W. Spicer is a professor with the Levin College at Cleveland State University. The views expressed here are his own and drawn in part from his recent book, *In Defense of Politics in Public Administration: A Value Pluralist Perspective*, published in 2010 by the University of Alabama Press.