

## CONSISTENCY IN POLITICS

**N**O one has written more boldly on this subject than Emerson:

‘Why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? . . .

‘A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines . . .

‘Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day.’

These are considerable assertions, and they may well stimulate thought upon this well-worn topic. A distinction should be drawn at the outset between two kinds of political inconsistency. First, a Statesman in contact with the moving current of events and anxious to keep the ship on an even keel and steer a steady course may lean all his weight now on one side and now on the other. His arguments in each case when contrasted can be shown to be not only very different in character, but contradictory in spirit and opposite in direction: yet his object will throughout have remained the same. His resolves, his wishes, his outlook may have been unchanged; his methods may be verbally irreconcilable. We cannot call this inconsistency. In fact it may be claimed to be the truest consistency. The only way a man can remain consistent amid changing circumstances is to change with them while preserving the same dominating purpose. Lord Halifax on being derided as a trimmer made the celebrated reply: ‘I trim as the temperate zone trims between the climate in which men are roasted and the climate in which they are frozen.’

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No greater example in this field can be found than Burke. His *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, his writings and speeches on the conciliation of America, form the main and lasting armoury of Liberal opinion throughout the English-speaking world. His *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, and *Reflections on the French Revolution*, will continue to furnish Conservatives for all time with the most formidable array of opposing weapons. On the one hand he is revealed as a foremost apostle of Liberty, on the other as the redoubtable champion of Authority. But a charge of political inconsistency applied to this great life appears a mean and petty thing. History easily discerns the reasons and forces which actuated him, and the immense changes in the problems he was facing which evoked from the same profound mind and sincere spirit these entirely contrary manifestations. His soul revolted against tyranny, whether it appeared in the aspect of a domineering Monarch and a corrupt Court and Parliamentary system, or whether, mouthing the watch-words of a non-existent liberty, it towered up against him in the dictation of a brutal mob and wicked sect. No one can read the Burke of Liberty and the Burke of Authority without feeling that here was the same man pursuing the same ends, seeking the same ideals of society and Government, and defending them from assaults, now from one extreme, now from the other. The same danger approached the same man from different directions and in different forms, and the same man turned to face it with incomparable weapons, drawn from the same armoury, used in a different quarter, but for the same purpose.

It is inevitable that frequent changes should take place in the region of action. A policy is pursued up to a certain point; it becomes evident at last that it can be carried no further. New facts arise which clearly render it obsolete; new difficulties, which make it impracticable. A new and possibly the opposite solution presents itself with overwhelming force. To abandon the old policy is often necessarily to adopt the new. It sometimes happens that the same men, the same Government, the same Party have to execute this *volte face*. It may

be their duty to do so because it is the sole manner of discharging their responsibilities, or because they are the only combination strong enough to do what is needed in the new circumstances. In such a case the inconsistency is not merely verbal, but actual, and ought to be boldly avowed. In place of arguments for coercion, there must be arguments for conciliation; and these must come from the same lips as the former. But all this may be capable of reasonable and honourable explanation. Statesmen may say bluntly, 'We have failed to coerce; we have now to conciliate,' or alternatively, 'We have failed to conciliate; we have now to coerce.'

Ireland with its mysterious and sinister influence has been responsible for many changes of this kind in British politics. We see Mr. Gladstone in 1886 after five years of coercion, after the fiercest denunciation of Irish Nationalists 'marching through rapine to the disintegration of the Empire,' turn in a month to those policies of reconciliation to which the rest of his life was devoted. Mr. Gladstone in his majestic and saintly manner gave many comforting and convincing reasons for his change, and there is no doubt that his whole nature was uplifted and inspired by his new departure. But behind all the eloquence and high-sounding declamation there was a very practical reason for his change, which in private at any rate he did not conceal.

During the interval between the fall of his Government in 1885 and his resumption of power in 1886, a Conservative Government held office with the support of the Irish vote, and the people—wrongly no doubt but sincerely—thought the Conservatives were themselves meditating a solution of the Irish problem on Home Rule lines. Confronted with this supposed fact he felt it impossible for the Liberal Party to march further along the path of coercion and a denial of Irish claims. But Mr. Gladstone was wrong in his judgment of the impending Conservative action. The Conservative Party would never at that stage have been capable of a Home Rule policy. They might have coquetted with the Irish vote as a manoeuvre in their fierce political battle with the Liberals; but any deci-

ded advance towards Home Rule would have split them from end to end, dethroned their leaders in such a course, and destroyed the power of the Party as a governing instrument. Mr. Gladstone gave to his opponents through this miscalculation what was virtually a twenty years' reign of power. Nevertheless the judgment of history will probably declare that Mr. Gladstone was right both in his resistance to Home Rule up to a certain point and in his espousal of it thereafter. Certainly the change which he made upon this question in 1886, for which he was so much condemned, was in every way a lesser change than that which was made by the whole Conservative Party on this same question thirty-five years later in 1921.

Apart from action in the march of events, there is an inconsistency arising from a change of mood or heart. *'Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.'* Few men avoid such changes in their lives, and few public men have been able to conceal them. Usually youth is for freedom and reform, maturity for judicious compromise, and old age for stability and repose. The normal progression is from Left to Right, and often from extreme Left to extreme Right. Mr. Gladstone's progress was by a striking exception in the opposite direction. In the immense period covered by his life he moved steadily and irresistibly from being 'the rising hope of stern unbending Tories' to become the greatest Liberal statesman of the nineteenth century. Enormous was the change of mood which this august transition represented. From the young Member of Parliament whose speech against the abolition of slavery attracted the attention of the House of Commons in 1833, from the famous Minister who supported the Confederate States against the North in the sixties, to the fiery orator who pleaded the cause of Bulgarian independence in the eighties, and the veteran Premier, the last scraps of whose matchless strength were freely offered in the nineties to the cause of Irish self-government—it was a transit almost astronomical in its scale.

It were a thankless theme to examine how far ambition to lead played its unconscious but unceasing part in such an

evolution. Ideas acquire a momentum of their own. The stimulus of a vast concentration of public support is almost irresistible in its potency. The resentments engendered by the warfare of opponents, the practical responsibilities of a Party Leader—all take a hand. And in the main great numbers are at least an explanation for great changes. 'I have always marched,' said Napoleon, 'with the opinion of four or five millions of men.' To which, without risking the reproach of cynicism, we may add two other sayings: 'In a democratic country possessing representative institutions it is occasionally necessary to defer to the opinions of other people'; and, 'I am their leader; I must follow them.' The integrity of Mr. Gladstone's career is redeemed by the fact that these two last considerations played a far smaller part in his life than in those of many lesser public men whose consistency has never been impugned.

It is evident that a political leader responsible for the direction of affairs must, even if unchanging in heart or objective, give his counsel now on the one side and now on the other of many public issues. Take for instance the strength and expense of the armed forces of a country in any particular period. This depends upon no absolute or natural law. It relates simply to the circumstances of the time and to the view that a man may hold of the probability of dangers, actual or potential, which threaten his country. Would there, for instance, be any inconsistency in a British Minister urging the most extreme and rapid naval preparations in the years preceding the outbreak of the Great War with Germany, and advocating a modest establishment and strict retrenchment in the years following the destruction of the German naval power? He might think that the danger had passed and had carried away with it the need for intense preparation. He might believe that a long period of peace would follow the exhaustion of the World War, and that financial and economic recovery were more necessary to the country than continuous armed strength. He might think that the Air was taking the place of the Sea in military matters. And he might be right

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and truly consistent both in the former and in the latter advocacy. But it would be easy to show a wide discrepancy between the sets of arguments in the two periods. Questions of this kind do not depend upon the intrinsic logic of the reasoning used on the one hand or the other, but on taking a just view of the governing facts of different periods. Such changes must, however, be considered in each particular case with regard to the personal situation of the individual. If it can be shown that he swims with the current in both cases, his titles to a true consistency must be more studiously examined than if he swims against it.

A more searching scrutiny should also be applied to changes of view in relation not to events but to systems of thought and doctrine. In modern British politics no greater contrast can be found than in comparing the Free Trade speeches of the late Mr. Joseph Chamberlain as President of the Board of Trade in the early eighties, with the Protectionist speeches which he delivered during the Tariff campaign at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Here we are dealing not with the turbulent flow of events, but with precise methods of thought. Those who read Mr. Chamberlain's Free Trade speeches will find that almost every economic argument which he used in 1904 was foreseen and countered by him in 1884. Yet the sincerity of his later views was generally accepted by friends and opponents alike. And after all, once he had come to think differently on economic subjects, was it not better that he should unhesitatingly give his country the benefit of his altered convictions? Still, it must be observed that the basis of reasoning had changed very little in the twenty years' interval, that the problem was mainly an abstract one in its character, and that it was substantially the same problem. There need be no impeachment of honesty of purpose or of a zealous and unceasing care for the public interest. But there is clearly in this case a contradiction of argument in regard to the same theory which amounts to self-stultification.

We may illustrate this distinction further. Mr. Chamberlain argued in 1884 that a tax on imports was paid by the

home consumer, and in 1904 that it was paid, very largely at any rate, by the foreigner. We cannot help feeling that the reasoning processes underlying these two conclusions are fundamentally incompatible, and it is hard to understand how a man who once saw the one process so clearly should subsequently have visualized and accepted the opposite process with equal vehemence and precision. It would have been better, tactically at any rate, for Mr. Chamberlain to have relinquished the abstract argument altogether and to have relied exclusively in his advocacy upon the facts—the world facts—which were really his reasons, the importance of consolidating the British Empire by means of a Zollverein, and the necessity of rallying support for that policy among the British industrial interests and the Conservative working classes; for these considerations, in his view, over-ruled—whether or not they contradicted—the validity of his purely economic conviction.

A Statesman should always try to do what he believes is best in the long view for his country, and he should not be dissuaded from so acting by having to divorce himself from a great body of doctrine to which he formerly sincerely adhered. Those, however, who are forced to these gloomy choices must regard their situation in this respect as unlucky. The great Sir Robert Peel must certainly be looked on as falling within the sweep of this shadow. Of him Lord John Russell sourly observed:

‘He has twice changed his opinion on the greatest political question of his day. Once when the Protestant Church was to be defended and the Protestant Constitution rescued from the attacks of the Roman Catholics, which it was said would ruin it, the Right Honourable Gentleman undertook to lead the defence. Again, the Corn Laws were powerfully attacked in this House and out of it. He took the lead of his Party to resist a change and to defend Protection. I think, on both occasions, he has come to a wise conclusion, and to a decision most beneficial to his country; first, when he repealed the Roman Catholic disabilities, and, secondly, when he abolished Protection. But that those who followed him—men that had committed themselves to these questions, on the faith of

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his political wisdom, on the faith of his sagacity, led by the great eloquence and ability he displayed in debate—that when they found he had changed his opinions and proposed measures different from those on the faith of which they had followed him—that they should exhibit warmth and resentment was not only natural, but I should have been surprised if they had not displayed it.’

This was a hard, yet not unjust, commentary upon the career of one of the most eminent and one of the noblest of our public men; for here not merely a change of view is in question, but the workaday good faith of a leader towards those who had depended upon his guidance and had not shared in his conversion.

A change of Party is usually considered a much more serious breach of consistency than a change of view. In fact as long as a man works with a Party he will rarely find himself accused of inconsistency, no matter how widely his opinions at one time on any subject can be shown to have altered. Yet Parties are subject to changes and inconsistencies not less glaring than those of individuals. How should it be otherwise in the fierce swirl of Parliamentary conflict and Electoral fortune? Change with a Party, however inconsistent, is at least defended by the power of numbers. To remain constant when a Party changes is to excite invidious challenge. Moreover, a separation from Party affects all manner of personal relations and sunders old comradeship. Still, a sincere conviction, in harmony with the needs of the time and upon a great issue, will be found to override all other factors; and it is right and in the public interest that it should. Politics is a generous profession. The motives and characters of public men, though constantly criticized, are in the end broadly and fairly judged. But, anyhow, where is Consistency to-day? The greatest Conservative majority any modern Parliament has seen is led by the creator of the Socialist party, and dutifully cheers the very Statesman who a few years ago was one of the leaders of a General Strike which he only last year tried to make again legal. A life-long Free Trader at the Board of Trade has

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framed and passed amid the loudest plaudits a whole-hearted Protectionist Tariff. The Government which only yesterday took office to keep the £ sterling from falling, is now supported for its exertions to keep it from rising. These astonishing tergiversations could be multiplied: but they suffice. Let us quote the charitable lines of Crabbe, in the hopes of a similar measure of indulgence:

‘Minutely trace man’s life; year after year,  
Through all his days let all his deeds appear,  
And then, though some may in that life be strange,  
Yet there appears no vast nor sudden change;  
The links that bind those various deeds are seen,  
And no mysterious void is left between.’