

Joseph L. Allen

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Politics as a Calling

A deep ambivalence characterizes the American public's attitude toward politics. On the one hand, the profession of politician ranks among those held in lowest esteem today. In a book that Professor William F. May is currently writing, he will refer to politics as a "despised profession."¹ And so it is, by many. They wouldn't want a son or daughter to go into that dirty business; they "wouldn't buy a used car from that person." But however low the general public's view of politicians may be, we know we need them. We may speak of politics as a necessary evil and compare it to cleaning up after your dog. Yet, when conditions in society are bad and we deeply need for something to be done about it, we see that politicians are necessary. We may disdain them, but we can't do without them. Politics can become a life-preserver thrown to a drowning populace.

The necessity of politics raises the question whether, theologically speaking, it can be a calling, and if so, in what ways. Theologically, to have a calling involves both an outer and an inner dimension.² Outwardly a calling is a certain kind of station or office in life. As Luther saw it, in order for any role or work to be a calling, it must be one that can be helpful to others if it is followed.³ Through it God calls one to serve the need and benefit of the neighbor,⁴ which is our duty in all of life's relationships. Moreover, a calling is an office whose presence serves the common good, the well-being of the whole community, and not only of individuals within it. This outer sense of a calling has a certain objectivity, in that whether an office can serve the good of others depends on how it is related to people's needs, and not only on what any particular individual thinks about it.

Internally, whether an office is a calling depends upon the motivation with which one pursues it. Inwardly, then, one has a calling when she understands that God has called her to this position, this work, specifically as a way of serving the need of the neighbor. If I hold a position that can outwardly speaking be a calling, and yet do not subjectively understand it as a calling, then I shall not pursue it as such. For me it is simply a job.

Of these two dimensions, the outward is my primary concern here. Is politics the kind of work that can *be* a calling? Is it a role that by its

Politics as a Calling

nature can be helpful to others—can serve the common good—if it is followed? And if it is, what kind of activity is the political practitioner called to carry on? What *is* the calling of the politician?

I shall explore this question in three steps. First, I shall identify some essential features of politics in order to ask what politics and politicians can contribute to human life. Next, I shall discuss one image of the politician that, even though it may describe how some politicians go about their work, is not an image that could be one's calling. Third, in contrast to this inadequate image, I shall sketch out two visions of the politician—two out of many possibilities—either of which can be a calling. One vision follows the principle of remedying some serious injustice or injustices; the other exalts the principle of conciliation as an alternative to violence in the midst of political con-

harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat.”⁵ Of course, people are not only different; they are also alike in some ways. Otherwise, they could not even communicate.⁶ Even so, politics presupposes plurality.

Second, politics presupposes moral agents acting within limits—*finite freedom*. A moral agent is one who can envision a desirable state of affairs and exercise choice in pursuing it. The capacity for vision and choice are essential ingredients of freedom. Without them, a group of people would not be a community, but a set of building blocks. If people had no freedom to decide this or that, politics would be impossible. Even so, we exercise our freedom only within limits: limited possessions, limited time, limited space. If moral agents were not finite, they would not need to deliberate; politics would be unnecessary. Politics is unimaginable without finite freedom.

Now combine the first two conditions—“without finities” and “within limits”:

alone politics would be impossible. With a mixture of the two we need to deliberate about our common life, and we can.

A fourth underlying condition of politics is *incomplete trustworthiness* among the community's members. Untrustworthiness is an expression of sin—the refusal to acknowledge the ultimate as ultimate and the refusal to cherish one's fellow creatures. When we think some

tribution that politics can make to human life. To embark upon politics as a *calling* is to set out to make this contribution.

But who is a politician? A politician is anyone who participates actively and directly in this process of deliberation and decision. If this is the most basic characteristic of a politician, then the term does not necessarily carry overtones of moral disapproval. "Politician" connotes most directly, not "one who makes shady deals behind the scenes," but "one who deliberates publicly about the shape of our common life as a people." If so, that makes many if not most of us politicians. This is one of our many roles in life, in that most of us engage publicly at some time or other in discussing governmental policies, and in ways that might affect the outcome, if only by affect-

Opportunism helps us to see that whatever forms politics can justifiably take, one who follows politics as a calling must be committed, however imperfectly or inconsistently, to some conception of the public good over and beyond personal benefit. Opportunism in politics, however often it appears, is not adequate as a calling.

Two Competing Visions of a Politician's Calling

In contrast, a valid vision of a political calling requires commitment to some kind of political principle or principles. There are various valid political visions. One might be called to the vision of greater social peace and security; or the vision of devising policies that enable a complex society to respond more effectively to its problems; or the vision of improving the conditions under which people live and work; or the vision of opposing this or that injustice. All these can be valid callings and valid visions, but they compete with one another. One politician cannot pursue them all, and no society can pursue them all simultaneously. These visions compete for a society's, and for a politician's, time, attention, and resources. This leads to one of the central problems of politics: what are we to do when valid visions compete? But more on that in a moment. What I want to do now is to concentrate on two among the many possible valid visions, either of which might be the organizing center for a politician's calling.

1. The first is the vision of the politician as *fighter against social injustices*. Some politicians pursue their calling primarily in terms of this vision. Rather than simply trying to help the political process to work, or mainly seeking benefits for those who elected them, they devote their energy to righting wrongs done to particular groups or categories of people. Sometimes the public comes to associate a politician's name closely with the group for which he or she has been the advocate: as Congressman Claude Pepper was an advocate for the elderly, and as Marian Wright Edelman—a nonelected politician—has been an advocate for children.

I have labelled this calling fighting against injustice rather than fighting for justice. Glenn Tinder has argued¹² that “a perfectly just society is not a feasible human project.” For one thing, the standards of justice are themselves in conflict with one another. Treating people according to their equal human worth can be in tension with giving to

each what has been promised, and so on. Furthermore, even if we could conceive of a perfectly just society, people would neither agree that it is just nor agree to support it, for we are fallen. So Tinder writes, “To be fallen is to be in some measure captured by injustice—to be unable to see what justice requires, to be unwilling to perform what it requires.”¹³ Every vision of perfect justice is therefore prone in one way or another to favor one’s own group.

Instead, Tinder continues, we are called to fight against injustice, and that is a feasible project. If we cannot envision what is perfectly just, we can still sometimes rightly perceive an injustice and can work to alleviate it. If we do not know what the perfectly just society would look like, we can know that it is unjust to deny people’s equal worth because of their skin color, their supposed race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their age, or, for that matter, their grievous offenses against society. Striving against injustice will demand all one’s insight and all one’s energies.

In such a way Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for one, has given much of his political career to trying to remedy injustices against the poor. He has done this even though I assume that, like everybody else, he has done it from some mixture of motives. As a social scientist he has sought to understand the roots of their poverty, and as a public official he has pursued two key strategies to help them: to strengthen their families and to provide them with good work. Anyone who persists in opposing injustices accumulates adversaries, if not enemies. Moynihan has had his share, including some of those he has tried to help, along with many who have had a stake in continuing the injustice. Over the years, though, this cause has been the center of his efforts as a politician.¹⁴

The calling to work against injustice has its characteristic dangers, even so. One danger is being so focused on one cause that no other issues matter. This is a special danger of the nongovernmental activist, who in the valid awareness of one human need may lose sight of other equally important needs. Another is the danger of self-righteousness. The campaigner against a serious injustice can easily slip into scorn for opponents, thinking them morally inferior because they resist her efforts, while they may find her similarly insensitive to the

causes they espouse. We would often rather deal with an opportunist than with people who never doubt the righteousness of their cause.

A third serious danger for the fighter against injustice is to turn into a fighter for the privileges of a particular group. It is one thing to oppose society's unfairness toward a mistreated group, society's refusal to grant them what is their due. It is a very different thing to devote oneself unceasingly to seeking more and more benefits for those who are becoming increasingly well-off. The courageous opponent of unfairness may over time become so closely wedded to one group that he constantly seeks their special advantage. Opposition to injustice thus mutates into pursuit of special privilege.

This distortion is similar to that of the legislator whose chief goal is to gain benefits for his district or state. He does everything he can to get pork barrel projects for his district, regardless of its effect on the national budget. It is a measure of voters' self-centeredness that they so often reward their representatives for being good at this kind of myopia instead of working for the wider public good.

But it appears also in the pursuit of less parochial causes, as with the efforts of Congressman Pepper. Not content with winning for the elderly a raise in the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70, he kept good group may have been treated, if it grounds.

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shifty problem of conciliation.” The need for conciliation arises from the pluralism of politics. The argument is that because there are many participants, and because the interests of those many will always be in some degree of conflict, then if the chief aim of politics is “reasonable stability and order,” politicians should work to conciliate those interests. Crick asks why this has to be done. He answers that it doesn’t. But, he says, politics goes on where conciliation occurs; politics is “that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion.” Conciliation is the only way to rule a conflictual society “without undue violence.”¹⁵

I agree with Crick that conciliation is a necessary work of politics, a work without which the peaceful ordering of a society cannot proceed. If so, some politicians are especially called to be skillful conciliators. In the midst of divisive debate they may be able to formulate a middle ground on which the conflicting parties can agree. Where no motion commands a majority, they are adept at persuading a few advocates of both sides to give a little in order to break a deadlock.

Their weapons are not mainly threats or enticements, though they may use these, but the capacity to persuade—to show that the alternatives to compromise are all worse. “If you could get your own way on this bill,” they might argue, “that would only promote among your opponents a disrespect for the law and an undermining of public order.” Or, they might say, “Give this middle ground a chance, and you will find that what you are most concerned about is not threatened.”

The political philosopher Martin Benjamin has distinguished two kinds of compromises. One he calls a “compromise in the standard sense,” in which the opposing parties continue to disagree and try to make the best of a bad situation. The other he calls compromise in “a loose sense,” in which the opposing parties “come to regard a third position . . . as superior to both initial positions and then embrace it.”¹⁶ In this second sense, the conciliator points to a more creative alternative than either side had considered—one that incorporates the main concerns of each side. Though the politician as conciliator may seek compromise in either sense, it is the “standard sense” in which I am most interested here—compromise that is making the best of a bad situation. In seeking this kind of compromise, the conciliator is one

who in the midst of deep conflict—in a political crisis—offers half a loaf to politicians on both sides who can't get the whole loaf. Neither side is happy with the outcome, but both sides prefer it to the available alternatives. So, in the crisis the political process continues; otherwise, it grinds to a halt. Surely some politicians who see themselves called to serve the common good are especially called to be conciliators.

A classic instance of the conciliator in the history of United States politics was Henry Clay. That was not his only political aim, by any means. He was an ambitious and vain man who badly wanted to be president, wanted to be known as a great man, and wanted to serve his Kentucky constituency. But he is probably best remembered as “the Great Compromiser,” or as some called him, “the Great Pacificator.” It was Clay whose imagination and skill produced the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which broke an impasse between the slave states and the free states and avoided, for a while, the dire threat that the Union would be dissolved. Again in 1833, it was Clay who worked a compromise between North and South over the issue of the tariff. And finally in 1850, it was Clay who imagined, proposed, and helped bring to reality another compromise between North and South, this time over several issues, including slavery in new states and in the territories, and the slave trade in the District of Columbia.

A recent biographer has written of Clay's efforts in 1833, “the Kentuckian was never rigid in his ideological thinking. Like any intelligent politician, he understood that politics is not about ideological purity or moral self-righteousness. It is about governing, and if a politician cannot compromise, he cannot govern effectively. And Henry Clay knew that only a true compromise—one in which both sides sacrifice something to achieve a greater benefit—could win over the nullifiers and draw them back from a determined course of self-destruction.”¹⁷

Even if one admires the skill of Clay the conciliator, doubts press in. Was slavery an interest with which anyone should have compromised? Even though Clay was a slaveholder, he insisted that he hated, he abominated slavery.¹⁸ Then what was he doing compromising with it? In the 1830s, in contrast to Clay's conciliating, John Quincy Adams pursued a different calling. He chose to fight against slavery.

After his term as president, Adams won election to the House of Representatives. In that office, among other pursuits, he carried on a sustained campaign to abolish slavery in the territories and in the District of Columbia. An account of that campaign is to be found in William Lee Miller's recent book, *Arguing About Slavery*.¹⁹ Adams and his allies in the Congress believed that the slavery interest deserved, not conciliation, but forthright opposition. Was Adams's

ing whether to have an abortion. In this conflict many people hold to a third view—that the politicians should arrive at some kind of compromise between these two poles, as an alternative to bringing the legislative process to a halt and inviting violence.

We can state the issue this way: when two sides have opposing, unquestioned conceptions of justice, what is to be done? Might compromise be morally justifiable?

Martin Benjamin has examined this question with great care. The question, he explains, is not whether one should compromise one's moral integrity. Is it possible, he asks, to compromise over policy without compromising one's integrity?²¹ The question arises where two conditions are present: (1) two sides are committed to opposing positions, but (2) one way or another, a decision must be made. In this situation a compromise is a way of splitting the difference, figuratively speaking—making the best of a bad situation.

Consider this kind of circumstance in which a politician may find herself. "I believe," she says to herself, "that it is always wrong to have an abortion. If there were laws prohibiting all abortions, this would express that moral conviction. But," she continues, "I live in a society in which many people have moral convictions to the contrary. We have to make some kind of decision about this, and we have to continue life together in society. If neither side can convince the other, we need to see whether we can find some middle ground."²²

Her reflections express what Martin Benjamin has in mind when he says that "the politician's identity and integrity are essentially dialectical." "The vocation of politics," he writes, ". . . requires a creative blend of commitment to particular positions and tolerance of opposing positions." He extols the politician "who manages to retain an independent moral identity while also, in the interests of the integrity of the community as a whole, acknowledging the positions of those whose world views point in a different direction." In his view, politicians "obsessed with a single issue at the expense of all other issues," or who follow the will of some single-issue movement, "are not genuine politicians. Their position denies the mediating and communal nature of politics as a social institution."²³

The Continuing Tension Between These Two Visions

Politics as a Calling

Here then are two contrasting though valid political callings—to relieve injustice and to conciliate intense conflict. There is a constant tension between the two. Each can be justifiable. Often they are compatible, but sometimes they are not. Each has its temptations. The calling to relieve injustice can degenerate into self-righteous intolerance of opponents. The calling to conciliate can submerge moral sensitivity to the desire for “peace in our time.” But each also has its strengths. Without efforts to relieve injustice, government becomes a vast oppression. Without the attempt to conciliate, politics turns into a war of each against all.

Determining in a given instance which is appropriate is a work that is always uncertain and unfinished. For that reason the calling of the politician must include both of these goals—to relieve injustice and to conciliate morally opposed positions. Better that the tension be within each politician, rather than that some refuse ever to compromise and others think that compromise is always the right move.

As we have seen, the presence of conflicting viewpoints is an enduring feature of any political community. Yet its members have to continue living together. Politics is the process of deliberation, negotiation, and often compromise, as a way to moderate conflict as much as possible in pursuit of the common good. The alternative to these political means is stalemate and the resort to violence. Ordinarily the calling of the politician is to continue the deliberation. It requires wisdom and skill both to do that and to recognize when, again for the common good, it is time to draw the line.

Endnotes

- 1 William F. May, *The Beleaguered Rulers* (manuscript in progress).
- 2 Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1062-1063 (book IV, chap. iii, sec. 11).
- 3 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 4.
- 4 This is Luther's characteristic way of indicating what should be the aim of a Christian's action; cf. "Christian Liberty," *Works of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), II, 335; "Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," *ibid.*, III, 239.
- 5 *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 51.
- 6 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959), pp. 155-156.
- 7 For discussions of conflict in society see Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1956), and Joseph L. Allen, *Love and Conflict* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), pp. 82-100.
- 8 Cf. Allen, *Love and Conflict*, p. 255.
- 9 Contrast Max Weber's broader use of the term to refer to leadership of a political association, and in particular, of the state; see his "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), esp. pp. 77-80.
- 10 Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 21.
- 11 John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*

Politics as a Calling

- 19 William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1996).
- 20 Remini, *Henry Clay*, p. 762.
- 21 Benjamin, *Splitting the Difference*, pp. 7-8.
- 22 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 140, 146.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 24 It is unclear to me whether Crick would approve of politics that at some point refuses to conciliate further. He quotes with approval an 1858 speech of Lincoln's opposing slavery but at the same time opposing those who "disregard its actual presence among us and the difficulty of getting rid of it suddenly in a satisfactory way" (*In Defence of Politics*, pp. 159-162). But what if no nonviolent "satisfactory way" emerges?

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