

Preface to Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Unpublished, 2013)

MAURICE GLASMAN

Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics* is the most enduring and significant essay on politics to come out of England in the past 100 years.

While written with the tone of an exasperated grammar school teacher explaining the simple laws of physics to a distracted group of 15 year old boys in a triple period on a Tuesday afternoon it has flashes of paradoxical glory that bear comparison to Machiavelli. He writes that:

Politics is a bold prudence, a diverse unity, an armed conciliation, a natural artifice, a creative compromise, and a serious game ... it is a reforming conserver, a sceptical believer, and a pluralist moralist, it has a lively sobriety, a complex simplicity, an untidy elegance, a rough civility, and an everlasting immediacy. (161)

It serves as an excellent description of the virtues of the book .

Politics, Crick says, is not 'tyranny' or 'oligarchy' or 'unity'. It is, listen at the back, 'simply' about how to reconcile different 'groups' 'interests' and 'traditions' to living 'within a territorial unit under a common rule'. (18)

Well, that's simple then. Only politics is also beguilingly complex. This book is both.

Crick excavates a distinctive seam of political thought that begins with the 'great' Aristotle, who is supplemented by Machiavelli and then the English tradition based upon the 'balance of power' or the 'mixed constitution'. Politics is about 'allowing the right institutions to develop' and good politics turns out to be the politics of the Common Good, in distinction to that of the general will (singular sovereignty) or the public interest (too legal and technocratic). Politics is about the balance of power rather than the battle for power, and is, therefore, a practice, an activity. 'Politics is a way of ruling divided societies without undue violence'. (33)

Politics is neither the application of science nor the enforcement of principle but is fundamentally relational. In fact, says Crick, in one of the many sublimely mundane turns in the book, politics can only be really compared to sexual intercourse. Put your phones away. How so? Well, because for both 'the sympathies that come from experience are better than those learnt in books'. If you can live without either then you are, as Aristotle said, either 'a beast or a god'. Both sex and politics are necessary in essence and unpredictable in form and both are better practiced lovingly and adventurously, courageously and faithfully. Crick goes further: 'Politics and love are the only form of constraints possible between free peoples.' (26) Vulnerability and potency are essential to both. It can fall apart but its best to keep it

together. Love and politics, the endless yearning for action and stability, relational self-expression, freedom and dependence.

Crick's preference for Machiavelli over Hobbes is that Hobbes is only interested in crisis management (a one-night stand that lasts forever) while Machiavelli understood the need for a polity to survive through time by generating relationships and institutions and the endless conciliation of interests, the tussle between virtue and fortuna. We all have the same interest in living together under conditions of reciprocal support. Sex and politics, argues Crick, are the great teachers and they teach the practice of reconciliation. 'Politics involves genuine relationships with people who are genuinely other people' (124). That is the starting point of a genuine politics.

Then there are the bad guys, who take up the bulk of the book. They want to boss you about too much because you're inefficient, and stupid, and because you don't understand your own interests, and are indeed your own worst enemy. They need to enlighten you as to the truth of belonging to this nation, class, company, or religion. They have no sympathy for the necessary and the voluntary nature of reconciliation, of peace as an active tension. They hate paradox and think of it as a contradiction that needs to be overcome rather than an estranged relationship to be reconciled. They don't want to conciliate; they want to dominate.

Bad sex. Bad conversation. Bad working life. Bad politics.

These are the scientific managers, the nationalists and ideologists, the technocrats that try to impose a single procedure on the regulation of human activity, who see no middle point between selfishness and altruism. They wish to apply scientific knowledge to the administration of society. That's not politics at all. They hate intermediate institutions, any form of particularity and association, any hierarchy, or form of tacit knowledge that challenges their dream of ruling all of society through human resource management. The contingency, particularity, and improvisation of politics, the fact that it is about persuasion and discussion is, for them, what makes it bad. Gordon Brown, comes to mind as the epitome of a human engineer who found the demands of politics superficial and distasteful, getting in the way of the 'big picture' defined in the colours of justice, fairness, and efficiency for the whole world. There is a connection between his high moralism and a very ugly low politics.

There is more than a dash of merry England about Crick. He has a sensitivity to the conservative tradition in its understanding of habit, custom, and events; but Conservatives overburden and diminish the idea of a tradition and turn it into an abstract category that inhibits creativity. He points out that there is an ancient tradition in England known as the 'good old cause' which united various forms of non-established faiths and skilled artisans who believed in a commonwealth and the liberties as well as land reform. Conservatives do not understand the ceaseless arguments within traditions or the necessity to create in order to conserve.

While conservatives are not paradoxical enough liberals are not paradoxical at all. They self-righteously view themselves as the only defenders of liberty while refusing to build a common life with others. They want, says Crick, 'the smooth fruit without wishing to care for the gnarled tree'. (129)

Crick is most tender and brutal with the Labour tradition. Socialism rejects the narrowness of conservatism and the generalities of liberalism but tends to impatience and a quest for certainty that leads to a contempt for politics, and for the living people who they wish to rule. There is a tendency to pursue an ethic of ultimate ends (justice, equality) and not an ethic of responsibility. They do not view compromise as a creative act, the ability to 'build a better future out of a wide and discriminating sympathy for all the best elements of the past' but as a betrayal of principle. In a Parliamentary Labour Party full of Oxford PPE graduates Crick's words are apposite. 'They appear before the people, but they are not of the people' (134). At its worst Labour politics becomes like student politics for adults with its infantilisation, abstract arguments, and grandiose futility. There is a desire to define Labour in terms of an abstract cause, but the Labour Movement was never like this. It was always a coalition of groups, traditions, and interests, the inheritor of the 'good old cause', rooted in a preceding politics.

The Labour movement in Britain has been a remarkably wide coalition, both of interests and of ideals, held together by a common sense of injustice arising from the monopoly of power once held by the Conservative and Liberal Parties and their lack of sympathy or response to working class needs and working class prestige. At no time was the Labour Party ever 'truly socialist' – a party of a single doctrine. The many voices of nonconformist and anti-establishment England joined together in the coalition of the Labour Movement ... to think of the growth and survival of British Labour is to be impressed not with the efficacy of a single doctrine, but with the wonder of politics. (138)

This is as good a description of the fundamental politics of 'Blue Labour' as can be. A sense of wonder at how the working people of Britain defended their human status by building institutions that strengthened their inheritance of liberty by asserting the necessity of sociability. The Labour Party is not the only tradition to have been abused by the bad guys who wish to impose their view of efficiency, justice, and prosperity and use the state as their means of achieving their ends. In doing so they destroy the 'wonder' of politics, the building of alliances between estranged forces through the democratic politics of reconciliation. New Labour fetishized the sovereign will of management in the private and the public sector and it left us with the crash, debt, and demoralisation. The answer lies not in the quest for the right policy but the renewal of politics, a conciliation between secular and religious, immigrant and local, north and south, men and women, middle and working class in defence of a free self-governing society.

Globalisation, in our time, is a threat to politics if it is understood as an unmediated fate that is to be accommodated to by ever increasing homogenisation of procedure and scientific

management. There is another way of responding and Crick draws our attention to it, and its called politics. Politics asks the question of how you can build a common good in conditions of radical pluralism, how it is possible to renew our traditions of liberty and democracy under conditions of modernity, how to turn a fate into a future that is shaped by living people using transformed inherited categories from the past. Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics* is a crucial part of that inheritance and it is an honour to be asked to write this preface.

Maurice Glasman
House of Lords
February 2013