MORE of the Story

April 1, 2023

Quote of the Week – Edmund Burke

"Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites, — in proportion as their love to justice is above their rapacity,—in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption,—in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.

It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters."

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edmund-Burke-British-philosopher-and-statesman

Edmund Burke, (born January 12? [January 1, Old Style], 1729, Dublin, Ireland—died July 9, 1797, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, England), British statesman, parliamentary orator, and political thinker prominent in public life from 1765 to about 1795 and important in the history of political theory. He championed conservatism in opposition to Jacobinism in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

Political life

After an unsuccessful first venture into politics, Burke was appointed secretary in 1765 to the Marquess of Rockingham, leader of one of the Whig groups, the largely liberal faction in Parliament, and he entered the House of Commons that year. Burke remained Rockingham's secretary until the latter's death in 1782. Burke worked to unify the group of Whigs that had formed around Rockingham; this faction was to be the vehicle of Burke's parliamentary career.

Burke soon took an active part in the domestic constitutional controversy of George III's reign. The main problem during the 18th century was whether king or Parliament controlled the executive. The king was seeking to reassert a more active role for the crown—which had lost some influence in the reigns of the first two Georges—without infringing on the limitations of the royal prerogative set by the revolution settlement of 1689. Burke's chief comment on this issue is his pamphlet "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents" (1770). He argued that George's actions were against not the letter but the spirit of the constitution. The choice of ministers purely on personal grounds was favouritism; public approbation by the people through Parliament should determine their selection. This pamphlet includes Burke's famous, and new, justification of party, defined as a body of men united on public principle, which could act as a constitutional link between king and Parliament, providing consistency and strength in administration, or principled criticism in opposition.

In 1774 Burke was elected a member of Parliament for Bristol, then the second city of the kingdom and an open constituency requiring a genuine election contest. He held this seat for six years but failed to retain the confidence of his constituents. For the rest of his parliamentary career he was member for Malton, a pocket

borough of Lord Rockingham's. It was at Bristol that Burke made the well-known statement on the role of the member of Parliament. The elected member should be a representative, not a mere delegate pledged to obey undeviatingly the wishes of his constituents. The electors are capable of judging his integrity, and he should attend to their local interests; but, more importantly, he must address himself to the general good of the entire nation, acting according to his own judgment and conscience, unfettered by mandates or prior instructions from those he represents.

Burke gave only qualified support to movements for parliamentary reform; though he accepted the possibility of widening political participation, he rejected any doctrine of mere rule of numbers. Burke's main concern, rather, was the curtailment of the crown's powers. He made a practical attempt to reduce this influence as one of the leaders of the movement that pressed for parliamentary control of royal patronage and expenditure. When the Rockingham Whigs took office in 1782, bills were passed reducing pensions and emoluments of offices. Burke was specifically connected with an act regulating the civil list, the amount voted by Parliament for the personal and household expenses of the sovereign.

A second great issue that confronted Burke in 1765 was the quarrel with the American colonies. Britain's imposition of the Stamp Act there in 1765, along with other measures, provoked unrest and opposition, which soon swelled into disobedience, conflict, and secession. British policy was vacillating; determination to maintain imperial control ended in coercion, repression, and unsuccessful war. Opposed to the tactics of coercion, the Rockingham group in their short administration of 1765–66 repealed the Stamp Act but asserted the imperial right to impose taxation by the Declaratory Act.

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 was initially greeted in England with much enthusiasm. Burke, after a brief suspension of judgment, was both hostile to it and alarmed by this favourable English reaction. He was provoked into writing his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) by a sermon of the Protestant dissenter Richard Price welcoming the Revolution. Burke's deeply felt antagonism to the new movement propelled him to the plane of general political thought; it provoked a host of English replies, of which the best known is Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791–92).

In the first instance Burke discussed the actual course of the Revolution, examining the personalities, motives, and policies of its leaders. More profoundly, he attempted to analyze the fundamental ideas animating the movement and, fastening on the Revolutionary concepts of "the rights of man" and popular sovereignty, emphasized the dangers of democracy in the abstract and the mere rule of numbers when unrestrained and unguided by the responsible leadership of a hereditary aristocracy. Further, he challenged the whole rationalist and idealist temper of the movement. It was not merely that the old social order was being pulled down. He argued, further, that the moral fervour of the Revolution, and its vast speculative schemes of political reconstruction, were causing a devaluation of tradition and inherited values and a thoughtless destruction of the painfully acquired material and spiritual resources of society. Against all this, he appealed to the example and the virtues of the English constitution: its concern for continuity and unorganized growth; its respect for traditional wisdom and usage rather than speculative innovation, for prescriptive, rather than abstract, rights; its acceptance of a hierarchy of rank and property; its religious consecration of secular authority and recognition of the radical imperfection of all human contrivances.