

Sir Robert Menzies on Politics

Duty of the Opposition

“My first proposition is that the duty of an Opposition, if it has no ambition to be permanently on the left-hand side of the Speaker, is not just to oppose for opposition’s sake, but to oppose selectively. No Government is always wrong on everything, whatever the critics may say. The Opposition must choose the ground on which it is to attack. To attack indiscriminately is to risk public opinion, which has a reserve of fairness not always understood.

I can illustrate my view of recounting an experience I had about a year or so after I became Leader of the Opposition. Some of my New South Wales colleagues told me that there was a strong opinion in Sydney that I was not ‘in the Press’ sufficiently; that I ought to attack the Government, if not daily, at least very frequently. I can remember my reply as if it were yesterday” ‘I’m sorry, but I entirely disagree. If I did what your friends think I should do, we would no doubt be regarded by them as a very active Opposition, but we would retain that position of honour for many years. But I want to put the Government out; if not in 1946, at least in 1949. I strongly believe that I should not be attacking them on everything. It would seem quite picturesque for a few weeks, but before long the electors would begin to say “Oh, here’s Menzies again! He wants us to believe that the Government is *always* wrong”. And they would soon weary of my attitude. My method requires that, when I make an attack, I should do so on some matter in which most people are very interested. Further, it should be a matter on which I have a powerful case, adequately documented and winnable. If I do this, the Government will feel the full impact of the assault; and so will the electors. I hold this view so strongly that I can’t change it; but you may feel that another leader would serve your purposes better’. Well, these were my friends and loyal colleagues, so they smiled and gave me their blessing.

The truth is that a Government is made up of ministers with a far closer knowledge of the problems of their departments and a far greater access to papers and expert advice than an Opposition can have. An attack upon them must therefore be made not on the spur of the moment, but with careful preparation after a careful choice of the subject-matter. With great respect, I distrust what a distinguished member of the House of Commons once christened ‘instant politics’; where the parliamentary battles all too frequently a ‘chance medley’ and fits into no strategic pattern.

My second proposition is that an Opposition must always remember that it is the alternative Government; that it is unwise, when in Opposition, to promise what you cannot perform; that a quick debating point scored in Parliament against some Government measure will be a barren victory unless you are confident that, in office, you would not be compelled to do, substantially, what the Government is doing. It is always an embarrassment to be confronted by your own words; a procedure well known to parliamentarians as ‘making the ghost walk’.

So that opposition is not enough. When you find yourself in Opposition and have recovered from the natural shock which accompanies the process, the first task is a positive one: to reconstruct; to find out what went wrong; to work out a programme of action; to initiate a new phase in political history. In other words, like an advocate

and cross-examiner in court, you must never lose sight of the end result to which all your activities must be directed. I found that opposition provided not only a great and enthralling opportunity to create a new and cohesive national party, but also an obligation to rethink policies, to look forward, to devise a body of ideas at once sound and progressive; a political philosophy founded upon the encouragement of private enterprise as the driving and creative element in the economics of society, and at the same time the imposing upon that enterprise of social and industrial obligations appropriate to a modern and civilized community. All of this, essentially work for the study, had to be done while the normal duties of active and campaigning politics were performed. It was not easy, and never will be. But it had to be done if a period in Opposition was to be not merely a period of frustration and dejection, but a splendid opportunity for a revival of the spirit and a replenishment of the mind.

The great error of the Labour Opposition in Australia, under Evatt and then Callwell, was that it tended to live in the past, on old hatreds and shibboleths, pursuing a current policy which demanded bigger and better pensions and other social benefits, fighting old and losing battles about issues long since dead. No symptom emerged of a real study of basic policy. Like the Bourbons, they learned nothing and forgot nothing.

It was always one of my political grievances that when I was in office, working a seventy-hour week on the day-to-day affairs of government, I had no time to do much real thinking and study on important issues except at the weekend, when I could assemble my papers, lock the door, and work my way through some complex matter.

But Opposition, with few administrative duties, gives more time for study and thought. It must be regarded as a great constructive period in the life of a party; properly considered, not a period in the wilderness, but a period of preparation of the high responsibilities which you hope will come.” R. G Menzies ‘The Gentle Art of Opposition’ *Measure of the Years* (1970) 22-24.

“A good Opposition is one in which quite a few members, while being completely loyal to their leader, can feel that they may have a Field-Marshal’s baton in the knapsack. And no man who ever aspired to the baton ever confined himself to a fraction of the great enterprise. In short, a powerful Opposition should contain quite a few potential Prime Ministers!” R. G Menzies ‘The Gentle Art of Opposition’ *Measure of the Years* (1970) 25.

“My concluding observation is this. There is a natural tendency, when you are in Opposition, to want to play your opponents at their own game, and beat them. The trouble about this is that it leaves the initiative to your opponent.

To my mind, the chief objective of an Opposition should be to make the voters feel that the Opposition, in both personnel and ideas, is as *different* as possible. All Governments in time begin to decay; people begin to feel that a change would do no harm. But they need to see the nature of the change; to find themselves confronted by a choice, a clear choice between differences. A Government may become unpopular, and begin to lose some of the enthusiasm of its supports. This does not mean that it is necessarily destined for defeat. If the Opposition has not created positive policies and secured positive support, the public attitude may become ‘A plague on both your houses’. And, if this cynicism becomes too deep-seated, there may be strange and

unpredictable electoral consequences. In Opposition, it is never very sensible to underestimate your opponent's talents or methods of debate, or to seek always to defeat him in his own field. Better by far to develop and deploy your own talents in your own way; to exhibit the differences between you; to develop your own personality, not his; to help to present to the people a choice, both of men and of ideas, to which you hope they will respond.

In short, I must respectfully reject the Randolph Churchill aphorism [‘that the duty of an Opposition is to oppose’]. It is my own view that the duty of an Opposition which wants to move over on to the Treasury Benches is to be constructive, judicious, and *different*.” R. G Menzies ‘The Gentle Art of Opposition’ *Measure of the Years* (1970) 26-27.

“From 1941 to 1949 I sat in Opposition, six years of the eight as Leader of a heavily outnumbered Opposition. This was difficult, but it was rich tactical training. By the time I came back as Prime Minister at the end of 1949, I had learned a lot more about the conducting of parliamentary business and the influencing of public opinion, and remained in office for another sixteen years. A Cabinet made up of people with experience like this, particularly experience on the floor of the House, has a pretty practical outlook on legislative programmes.” R.G. Menzies, ‘Our Relations with The United States of America’, *Afternoon Light* (1967) 275.

Electing the Ministry

“[T]here has been in recent years a demand by several Liberal members of the Australian Commonwealth Parliament that ministers should be directly chosen by the party members. Though this practice would obviously make life much easier for the Prime Minister, I always resisted its adoption, for reasons which may be worth recording.

The first was that, in the words of Clement Attlee, ‘A Prime Minister who is unfit to choose his ministerial colleagues is unfit to be Prime Minister’.

The second was that you are much more likely to achieve Cabinet cohesion when each minister owes his appointment to his Leader than when the minister owes it to his selection by other people. I believe that Cabinet solidarity is of the first importance. More Governments have been destroyed by internal division than by frontal attack by the enemy. When I was in office and had my weekly party meeting, ministers presented a common front when some Cabinet decision was under criticism, though, of course, a powerful criticism would sometimes result in a Cabinet reconsideration. But in a meeting of a party which elects ministers, some minister whose views have been defeated in Cabinet would be a little more than human if he did not improve the shining hour at a party meeting where he could hope to overthrow a majority Cabinet view. Real Cabinet solidarity cannot long survive in such circumstances.” R. G Menzies ‘The Gentle Art of Opposition’ *Measure of the Years* (1970) 25-26.

Importance of ideas

But [the public] are saying to us, ‘What ideas are you offering to this community?’ *Unless we have ideas to offer we cannot develop a real sense of conviction, a real instinct of political faith, and this election will be just one more*

election on top of those which have gone. Just one more election will never do.” R.G. Menzies, ‘The Magnificent Voyage’, in Graeme Starr, *The Liberal Party of Australia: A Documentary History*, (1980) 86.

Importance of Unity

“If you were to have a look at the history of non-Labour politics for years past you would find it profoundly marred, and indeed ruined, by disunity. *Let no man suppose that disunity is something for which somebody else is responsible.* I have talked to people who talk about disunity as though it were something that occurred only at Canberra; as if it were always something that existed only between two people. There has been disunity at Canberra. I am happy to say that there is none to-day on our side of politics. Does it not go back to this fact – and I offer it to you as a challenge – that in many parts of Australia, out of every two leading supporters of the Party, one has been busily engaged in explaining how little he thinks of the other? In my own case frequently both of them have been busily agreeing much better off the Party would be with a new Leader. This reflection can come not only to one or two people, but to tens of thousands of people of our own political persuasion.

We will not deserve to succeed until we have achieved loyalty and unity, and have decided that, once the standard has been raised and we can go into action, we are serving under the best general and are fighting for victory in a great cause.

To vary the metaphor, do not let us be led off into the error of arguing about the furnishing of the building until we have put in the foundations.” R.G. Menzies, ‘The Magnificent Voyage’, in Graeme Starr, *The Liberal Party of Australia: A Documentary History*, (1980) 86-87

Policy from a long term Government

“After 12 years the ALP can easily make a series of brand new offers without saying where the new hundreds of millions are to come from; though they will, of course, come from you. For governments have no money to spend except that which has been earned and paid over, by tax or loan, by the men and women of Australia.

But we are a Government whose policies and ideas have been for 12 years put into practice. For us to come along now with a string of new promises would excite your ridicule. You could well say: “You have had years to do these things. Why didn’t you think of them before?”

We offer you good government. The essential quality of good government is that it should have sound and intelligible objectives with resoluteness, that it should be able to meet the storms that arise from time to time with a proper sense of navigation, that it should have cohesion in its own ranks and a strong sense of mutual loyalty.” R.G. Menzies, ‘Federal Election 1961 Joint Policy Speech’ in Graeme Starr, *The Liberal Party of Australia: A Documentary History*, (1980) 208.