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Promise and Performance

IT is customary to express wonder and horror at the cynical baseness of the doctrines of Machiavelli. Both the wonder and the horror are justified—though it would perhaps be wiser to keep them for the society which the Italian described rather than for the describer himself—but it is somewhat astonishing that there should be so little insistence upon the fact that Machiavelli rests his whole system upon his contemptuous belief in the folly and low civic morality of the multitude, and their demand for fine promises and their indifference to performance. Thus he says: “It is necessary to be a great deceiver and hypocrite; for men are so simple and yield so readily to the wants of the moment that he who will trick shall always find another who will suffer himself to be tricked.... Therefore a ruler must take great care that no word shall slip from his mouth that shall not be full of piety, trust, humanity, religion, and simple faith, and he must appear to eye and ear all compact of these... because the vulgar are always caught by appearance and by the event, and in this world there are none but the vulgar.”

It therefore appears that Machiavelli's system is predicated partly on the entire indifference to performance of promise by the prince and partly upon a greedy demand for impossible promises among the people. The infamy of the conduct championed by Machiavelli as proper for public men is usually what rivets the attention, but the folly which alone makes such infamy possible is quite as well worthy of study. Hypocrisy is a peculiarly revolting vice alike in public and private life; and in public life—at least in high position—it can only be practised on a large scale for any length of time in those places where the people in mass really warrant Machiavelli's description, and are content with a complete divorce between promise and performance.

It would be difficult to say which is the surest way of bringing about such a complete divorce: on the one hand, the tolerance in a public man of the non-performance of promises which can be kept; or, on the other hand, the insistence by the public upon promises which they either know or ought to know cannot be kept. When in a public speech or in a party platform a policy is outlined which it is known cannot or will not be pursued, the fact is a reflection not only upon the speaker and the platform-maker, but upon the public feeling to which they appeal. When a section of the people demand from a candidate promises which he cannot believe that he will be able to fulfill, and, on his refusal, support some man who cheerfully guarantees an immediate millennium, why, under such circumstances the people are striving to bring about in America some of the conditions of public life which produced the profligacy and tyranny of medieval Italy. Such conduct means that the capacity for self-government has atrophied; and the hard-headed common sense with which the American people, as a whole, refuse to sanction such conduct is the best possible proof and guarantee of their capacity to perform the high and difficult task of administering the greatest republic upon which the sun has ever shown.

There are always politicians willing, on the one hand, to promise everything to the people, and, on the other, to perform everything for the machine or the boss, with chuckling delight in the success of their efforts to hoodwink the former and serve the latter. Now, not only should such politicians be regarded as infamous, but the people who are hoodwinked by them should share the blame.

The man who is taken in by, or demands, impossible promises is not much less culpable than the politician who deliberately makes such promises and then breaks faith. Thus when any public man says that he “will never compromise under any conditions,” he is certain to receive the applause of a few emotional people who do not think correctly, and the one fact about him that can be instantly asserted as true beyond peradventure is that, if he is a serious personage at all, he is deliberately lying, while it is only less certain that he will be guilty of base and dishonorable compromise when the opportunity arises. “Compromise” is so often used in a bad sense that it is difficult to remember that properly it merely describes the process of reaching an agreement. Naturally there are certain subjects on which no man can compromise. For instance, there must be no compromise under any circumstances with official corruption, and of course no man should hesitate to say as much. Again, an honest politician is entirely justified in promising on the stump that he will make no compromise on any question of right and wrong. This promise he can and ought to make good. But when questions of policy arise—and most questions, from the tariff to municipal ownership of public utilities and the franchise tax, are primarily questions of policy—he will have to come to some kind of working agreement with his fellows, and if he says that he will not, he either deliberately utters what he knows to be false, or else he insures for himself the humiliation of being forced to break his word. No decent politician need compromise in any way save as Washington and Lincoln did. He need not go nearly as far as Hamilton, Jefferson, and Jackson went; but some distance he must go if he expects to accomplish anything.

Again, take the case of those who promise an impossible good to the community as a whole if a given course of legislation is adopted. The man who makes such a promise may be a well-meaning but unbalanced enthusiast, or he may be merely a designing demagogue. In either case the people who listen to and believe him are not to be excused, though they may be pitied. Softness of heart is an admirable quality, but when it extends its area until it also becomes softness of head, its results are anything but admirable. It is a good thing to combine a warm heart with a cool head. People really fit for self-government will not be misled by over-effusiveness in promise, and, on the other hand, they will demand that every proper promise shall be made good.

Wise legislation and upright administration can undoubtedly work very great good to a community, and, above all, can give to each individual the chance to do the best work for himself. But ultimately the individual’s own faculties must form the chief factor in working out his own salvation. In the last analysis it is the thrift, energy, self-mastery, and business intelligence of each man which have most to do with deciding whether he rises or falls. It is easy enough to devise a scheme of government which shall absolutely nullify all these qualities and insure failure to everybody, whether he deserves success or not. But the best scheme of government can do little more than provide against injustice, and then let the individual rise or fall on his own merits. Of course something can be done by the State acting in its collective capacity, and in certain instances such action may be necessary to remedy real wrong. Gross misconduct of individuals or corporations may make it necessary for the State or some of its subdivisions to assume the charge of what are called public utilities. But when all that can be done in this way has been done, when every individual has been saved so far as the State can

save him from the tyranny of any other man or body of men, the individual's own qualities of body and mind, his own strength of heart and hand, will remain the determining conditions in his career. The people who trust to or exact promises that, if a certain political leader is followed or a certain public policy adopted, this great truth will cease to operate, are not merely leaning on a broken reed, but are working for their own undoing.

So much for the men who by their demands for the impossible encourage the promise of the impossible, whether in the domain of economic legislation or of legislation which has for its object the promotion of morality. The other side is that no man should be held excusable if he does not perform what he promises, unless for the best and most sufficient reason. This should be especially true of every politician. It shows a thoroughly unhealthy state of mind when the public pardons with a laugh failure to keep a distinct pledge, on the ground that a politician cannot be expected to confine himself to the truth when on the stump or the platform. A man should no more be excused for lying on the stump than for lying off the stump. Of course matters may so change that it may be impossible for him, or highly inadvisable for the country, that he should try to do what he in good faith said he was going to do. But the necessity for the change should be made very evident, and it should be well understood that such a case is the exception and not the rule. As a rule, and speaking with due regard to the exceptions, it should be taken as axiomatic that when a man in public life pledges himself to a certain course of action he shall as a matter of course do what he said he would do, and shall not be held to have acted honorably if he does otherwise.

All great fundamental truths are apt to sound rather trite, and yet in spite of their triteness they need to be reiterated over and over again. The visionary or the self-seeking knave who promises the golden impossible, and the credulous dupe who is taken in by such a promise, and who in clutching at the impossible loses the chance of securing the real though lesser good, are as old as the political organizations of mankind. Throughout the history of the world the nations who have done best in self-government are those who have demanded from their public men only the promise of what can actually be done for righteousness and honesty, and who have sternly insisted that such promise must be kept in letter and in spirit.

So it is with the general question of obtaining good government. We cannot trust the mere doctrinaire; we cannot trust the mere closet reformer, nor yet his acrid brother who himself does nothing, but who rails at those who endure the heat and burden of the day. Yet we can trust still less those base beings who treat politics only as a game out of which to wring a soiled livelihood, and in whose vocabulary the word "practical" has come to be a synonym for whatever is mean and corrupt. A man is worthless unless he has in him a lofty devotion to an ideal, and he is worthless also unless he strives to realize this ideal by practical methods. He must promise, both to himself and to others, only what he can perform; but what really can be performed he must promise, and such promise he must at all hazards make good.

The problems that confront us in this age are, after all, in their essence the same as those that have always confronted free peoples striving to secure and to keep free government. No political philosopher of the present day can put the case more clearly than it was put by the wonderful old Greeks. Says Aristotle: "Two principles have to be kept in view: what is possible, what is becoming; at these every man ought to aim." Plato expresses precisely the same idea: "Those who are not schooled and practised in truth [who are not honest and upright men] can never manage aright the government, nor yet can those who spend their lives as closet philosophers; because the former have no high purpose to guide their actions, while the latter keep aloof from public life, having the idea that even while yet living they have been translated

to the Islands of the Blest... [Men must] both contemplate the good and try actually to achieve it. Thus the state will be settled as a reality, and not as a dream, like most of those inhabited by persons fighting about shadows.”