

**ON THE PRESENT  
BALANCE OF  
PARTIES IN THE STATE**

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On the Present Balance of Parties in the State by Sir John Walsh

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BY  
SIR JOHN WALSH, BART. M.P.

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Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance, and protection to each other.

HUME'S ESSAYS.

**Third Edition.**

LONDON:  
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

1882.

750.

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SECTION I.

ON PARTIES IN POLITICS.—THE OLD WHIG AND  
TORY.

**P**OLITICAL party, in its best acceptation, is a union of persons of influence in a state, linked together by the bonds of similar opinions upon questions of national policy, and co-operating for the promotion of their common views. It is necessary to the character of an honourable and powerful party that it should repose upon a broad basis of distinct and well-defined principles in politics, and that the connection of its members should spring from their agreement upon these general principles. It naturally happens that men sincerely convinced of the practical benefit of certain measures, or of the abstract truth of certain views of government, seek the means of putting them into execution; and it follows, that the fair pursuit or preservation of power by legitimate means is a justifiable object of party. To enable bodies of individuals to

pursue with their whole strength any common aim, their efforts must be combined under some presiding direction; and, as a great diversity of shades of opinion will always be found in a number of individuals, they must consent to wave all minor differences, and defer to some acknowledged leaders the task of guiding the efforts of the whole, to forward those general objects in which they are all agreed.

In this description party is placed in its most favourable light, as it ought to be, rather than as it is ever found to exist. Mr. Burke has thus depicted it in his *Thoughts on the Causes of the present Discontents*, with his usual force of mind and beauty of language. But in these passages Mr. Burke, himself a zealous partisan, is the apologist of party. It will never realise this *beau idéal* till it can be formed of a race of human beings far more free than any we have yet seen, from the influence of human infirmities. In its practical operation it always has, and always will exhibit, a great alloy of selfishness and passion,—qualities deeply ingrafted in the nature of man, and which are particularly called forth by the excitements and the struggles of public life. There are certain evil tendencies in party which will be constantly at work to deteriorate its nature, and to divert it from its proper objects. A sympathy of opinions first attracts its elements together; an identity of interests may soon become the uniting cement betwixt them. The feelings of an ardent patriot-



ism may be superseded by the narrow and less noble impulses of an *esprit de corps*. Men begin by seeking power that they may accomplish great measures of policy; they sometimes end by using measures as instruments to acquire, or to retain power. There is likewise this inherent evil in party, that it promotes its objects by dividing the nation; that it inevitably kindles opposition; and that if from these collisions the latent energies of character and intellect are elicited, and the highest powers called into action, on the other hand angry passions are roused, and the seeds of fierce and lamentable dissensions sown. Confined to the arena of public life, and the body of public men, disciplined and controlled by the customs of Parliamentary discussion, and by the courtesies of polished society, this powerful stimulant may indeed arouse the mental faculties, without its effects upon the passions being sufficient to counterbalance the benefit. Where it pervades a great portion of the nation, dividing it against itself, and acting upon the feelings more than upon the intellectual powers of the people, its pernicious consequences can scarcely be doubtful.

I have endeavoured succinctly to state the advantages and disadvantages of political parties in a state, not because the question can ever now be usefully agitated of the expediency of their existence in this nation. In a greater or less degree, we have always had parties among us: party spirit is inseparable from the nature of our institutions

and the form of our government; and, while it preserves any vestige of a popular character, the divisions and contests of party, with their evils and their benefits, will continue to be found interwoven with our system. My object is of a different nature. In fairly bringing forward the ostensible aims, in tracing the legitimate bounds, in describing the useful results, of party combinations — and, on the other hand, in exposing the errors, the evils, and the vices, of which party spirit may be the cause,—we may form in our own minds a standard to measure the conduct of each particular party. The system is capable of a certain useful direction; it is liable to specific abuses. There ought to be a code of morals expressly for the use of parties, — a martial law for these regiments of politicians. We must endeavour to ascertain how far they pursue the laudable purpose they profess to seek, — how far they avoid the faults to which their composition inclines them; without expecting that they can quite attain the one, or wholly escape the other. In every thing human, we can only hope for an approximation to good.

First, we are entitled to require that a party should be founded upon some acknowledged adherence to fixed principles of policy, which they profess, in contradistinction to their opponents. If they have not a known creed of political faith, a uniform complexion of opinions, they are a mere band of adventurers in pursuit of power. An in-

imate and sincere conviction of the truth and importance of these fundamental points is the virtue — is the sole elevating and ennobling quality — of party.

Secondly, we must watch that the spirit of party does not overpower the nobler and purer sentiment of devotion to the national welfare; we must be on our guard that the interests of a party do not become the predominating objects of its members, to the exclusion of those motives of patriotism which ought originally to have presided at its birth, and which alone can dignify, or even excuse its existence.

Thirdly, we must always wish that the body of the nation should be spectators — the observant spectators, — but not the actors in political contentions. Parties in politics are ever possessed with the rage of proselytism. The true interests of good government are not advanced by sowing among a whole people the seeds of bitter strife, and introducing a war of opinions and of passions. As long as the great body of the community continues neuter it constitutes a court of appeal, to which rival factions refer, which controls them within the bounds of moderation, which exercises a salutary influence over their acts. But let a party succeed in inoculating a great portion of the people with their spirit — let a country be split into divisions — and this tribunal is dissolved. The passions of whole classes are roused, their imaginations are heated; men are no longer in that frame of mind