A POLITICAL VIEW OF THE TIMES; OR, A DISPASSIONATE INQUIRY INTO THE MEASURES AND CONDUCT OF THE MINISTRY AND OPPOSITION

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Per vos, Quirites, et gloriam majorum, tolerate adversa et consulite Reipublicæ.—— *Fragm.* SALLUST.

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POLITICAL

VIEW OF THE TIMES.

THE study of POLITICS, in its true and ancient signification, was that high and noble science which embraced all the social relations and interests of man. It regarded him in his most exalted character; not as a wretched and helpless individual, but as a constituent member of a regulated community. It taught him his own dignity, as well as his duty to his species. It contained all the arts within itself which can strengthen or adorn a nation; it bound society together by all the ties which can give safety or value to existence. It dwelt not in mere theory or speculation, but it entered into the real business of life, and directed public affairs on the most extended scale, and in the most momentous occurrences. It was, in this sense, the most sublime and comprehensive branch of human wisdom: it was the study of kings and legislators, the nurse of civilization, the guardian of commonwealths: and even morals, as they attended merely to the regulation of private and domestic conduct, formed a subordinate part of science, inferior in utility and importance. But

this meaning of the term seems no longer understood—the grandeur and elevation of the study are no more. In the stead of the finest and most magnificent attainment of the human intellect, there has sprung up among us a bastard and degenerate science, assuming to itself the name of politics, which as much mistakes the office as it disgraces the title. It has descended from those universal and immutable principles, which are founded on the firm basis of acknowledged equity, to particular views and temporary purposes, wavering with the uncertainty of individual opinion, and varying with the fluctuation of personal interest. It grasps no primary maxims of law and government; it undertakes no generous labours for the public good: it pursues only the petty designs of faction, the low objects of vulgar ambition, the miserable contest for power and preferment. It is the science of supplanting a rival, of influencing a party—and not unfrequently of deluding a multitude, and throwing a kingdom into confusion. The politician, in those older times of which I have been speaking, was a man who first studied with attention the law of nature and of nations, and the grand rules on which all government is founded, that he might afterwards apply the maturity of his knowledge to the due maintenance of the constitution under which he lived, and the universal welfare of the community of which he was a member. He was not a statesman only in his closet; but he examined, together with the past history of the land, the existing genius and temper of its inhabitants. He had no party but his country—no public wish, but its prosperity. Our modern politicians no more resemble such a character, than a Greek of the present day resembles Lycurgus or Pericles. They are either theorists, who, lost amid the chimeras of metaphysical abstraction, frame

in their disordered fancies something which Burke would call "a monster of a constitution;" who chase, with eager fondness, some visionary plan of impracticable improvement; who never take into consideration the actual disposition of the people, or the peculiar circumstances of the times; who can neither make their systems for men, nor adapt men to their systems: in short, they are either speculative projectors, or they are something worse—they are dangerous innovators, and factious alarmists. They affect to admire the glorious fabric of our constitution; they wish, therefore, as they say, to restore to their original stability and beauty, some parts of it which are decayed and tottering to their fall. But their efforts, in reality, would tend to demolish the whole edifice, and level with the very ground, like the devoted temple of Jerusalem, that proudest monument of human reason, erected by the wisdom and virtue of our forefathers. They flatter the multitude by filling their minds with wrong notions and extravagant pretensions; they are impelled by a wild desire of transient notoriety, and forget that for true public virtue there is such a reward as lasting reputation: they court the fickle affections of the populace, while they neglect the solid approbation of the country. In their short-sighted views, they look only to the advancement of their party and themselves—yet even their own interest they seem little to understand. In pursuing their object, the means are generally as ridiculous as the end is despicable. I might trace other features in the portrait—but I already sicken at the task. It is a portrait which no lover of his country can contemplate with pleasure. I may be compelled, perhaps, as I proceed, to depict in stronger colours our modern politicians and our modern patriots. Yet, what occasion is there to give in detail the description of

such characters, when the examples, however we might wish to forget or overlook them, daily and hourly force themselves upon our notice?

These are general remarks; but they are closely connected with the subject before us—a sketch of the present period, and the existing posture of affairs. Let us apply them more particularly. I would say then, that the present system of politics in this country, and the present race of politicians, are one great cause of our difficulties as a nation. The public men on all sides are pulling a different way; and while they are madly engaged in contending with each other, England herself is torn and lacerated by their divisions. On the other hand, a little harmony and moderation, a mutual oblivion of the past, and a mutual forbearance for the future—a temporary truce to angry discussions on minor points, and a sincere regard for the general interests of the empire, might yet, in a short time, relieve us from our apprehensions, and extricate us from our dangers. This is the leading principle which, in the following observations, I shall endeavour to establish. Whatever be the execution, I need not be ashamed of the design. Other incidental points, which I shall state hereafter, will indeed naturally be blended with it; for we must endeavour, in the first place, to distinguish with accuracy and precision the real evils and the real causes of those evils: and, in the second, to point out those remedies, which are not only the best in themselves, but the most practicable in their application. The mere knowledge must be nugatory and useless; and may even increase the distemper by the alarm which it excites: yet without such knowledge we shall begin to act upon mistaken principles; we shall administer our remedies at hazard, like the political empirics who surround us;

and, instead of removing the disease from the body politic, we shall aggravate its symptoms, and fix it more deeply and more permanently in the constitution. At last, however, we must arrive at the conclusion, that the most disastrous evil under which we labour consists in those interested factions, which dismember and distract the state, while they prevent that union and co-operation, which, if they cannot ensure, must at least tend to advance, the national and common welfare. And surely, if it be owned that our present politics are part of a dwindled, and confined, and mischievous system, it will be but too easy to prove, that there never was a period in this country which called more earnestly and more imperatively for either enlarged policy or genuine patriotism.

"I have lived in times," said Lord Grey, "big with extraordinary events, without a parallel in the annals of the world." And who is there among us, whose heart is not an echo to the sentiment of his Lordship? We have, indeed, been thrown into an age pregnant with confusion, and marked out, as it were, by Providence, for uncommon occurrences. Revolution upon revolution, and convulsion upon convulsion, have passed before our eyes on the mighty theatre of the universe, with the same rapid succession, the same wonderful vicissitudes, as on the stage of mimic representation—or rather, the dramatist would not venture to exhibit such surprising changes as the historian must describe. Kingdoms have been the scene, and their sovereigns the actors. Wars—the most extensive in their scale, the most complicated in their operations, and attended with the most unprecedented variety of fortune—have carried mourning and desolation into every country of Europe but our own. The gigantic