

An Intellectual's Difficulties in Politics

Jan Sokol

It is a good intellectual habit to start by presenting a thesis, to say in advance what you really mean, before you try to cover your meaning in beautiful arguments. The thesis of this article is perhaps disappointing. It says that the old wisdom of politics being the art of the possible is true, but in a much stronger sense than is usually believed. In particular, it maintains that the tasks of a politician are very different from those of an intellectual, and that this is a good thing.

The Russian dissident writer A. Amalrik, in his undeservedly forgotten book about whether the USSR could survive the year 1984, wrote that his report of personal experience from the inside could be perhaps of as much interest to Sovietologists, as a talking fish would be to ichthyologists. What follows is in no sense a scientific communication, but nothing more (and nothing less) than a report on a singular and highly personal experience in a political position. And politicians on duty do not usually indulge in very sincere reflexions about what they are really doing, and how and why they are doing it.

By a totally unexpected constellation of events I, like many of my intellectual friends in Czechoslovakia and in the other East-European countries, was literally thrown into practical politics immediately after the 1989 upheaval. Many of us, writers, actors, artists, philosophers, sociologists, scientists and others, used for years to think about the present state and the possible future(s) of our respective societies and spent considerable amounts of time and energy in doing this. Many of us had a rather precise idea of what were the main sins — or to be more polite, deficiencies — of the communist political system and at least a hazy picture of what we would eventually like to have instead. There were even people, although they were much less numerous, who thought about

what should be done first, second and what should wait till afterwards, *lil* seems that several of them formed a rather precise picture of these steps, to be taken. But it came for all of us as a sheer surprise, sometimes even a horrific one, when we suddenly found out that there was nobody else to do it, and that, consequently, it was we who had to do it. That is, by ourselves.

What puzzled us then most of all was not the task itself, although enormous and difficult to grasp in its complexity, of transforming a rotten and disintegrating "socialist" state into a state-of-the-art modern liberal one, without threatening or even paralyzing its daily operation. It was incomparable with what our grandfathers successfully did in 1918 and our fathers (with less success) in 1945, just because of the nature of the totalitarian state, which controlled, or at least pretended to control, literally everything. But the worst nightmares of that marvelous time were those of methods and techniques. Of the know-how and, of course, know-who.

It was then beyond question that we had to proceed from the start by at least mimicking the methods and mechanisms of a democratic state, even in creating its very institutions anew. To all of us it was clear that just this democratic functioning could not be postponed in the way, military dictators e.g. in South America used to do. That even if at the beginning it was perhaps not more than a make-believe, it was simply vital. To my colleagues, and later to various visitors and experts from abroad, I used to explain this using the example of the cure of a man struck by cardiac infraction: instead of putting the patient to bed and anxiously observing his damaged body functions, modern therapy consists basically in urging him to behave as — or to make believe himself that — he is a healthy person, walking, running, cycling.

On this point we hoped to be a step ahead of philosophizing would-be politicians and utopians of all times, from Plato or Morus up to the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, and thus to escape the obvious traps of the "best of all possible worlds". This was the (negative) lesson of the marxist utopia. In my country, we were happy to have at least one rather successful example to follow, namely the founder of Czechoslovakia, T.G. Masaryk: a sociologist, philosopher, university professor, who in a time of emergency succeeded in becoming a successful politician. To be sure, there were important differences, too. As just mentioned the task of Masaryk in 1918 was much more limited than ours. Pre-1918 Austria was a liberal state with good or even excellent administration, a healthy economy and more or less liberal habits among its citizens. They were, for example, familiar with the idea of parlia-

mentary debate and were not much surprised, when it became no better. But, even more important, Masaryk himself had time and occasion to acquire some experience in practical politics in the Austrian parliament. Most of us were in this respect completely "virgin soil".

A real intellectual cannot help but continually observe his own moods and way of thinking. This is perhaps his most important advantage, his most valuable weapon, particularly in new situations. And entering practical politics for the first time is a very new situation. Because what I just termed "entering politics" is somewhat of a euphemism for acquiring a certain share of real power. At this moment a lot of things change.

The sober informality of democratic procedures might at this point even be a bit misleading, because you enter into your new position without any formal warning. In this, the old-time kings were decidedly better off: there was a solemn and public ceremony, there was the particular clothing, there was the crown — plenty of things to warn you, that from now on nothing will be as it used to be. I am pretty sure that most of my fellows, newcomers in politics, at first did not notice what had really happened to them. Some noticed it later, and some, when it was too late: when they were kicked out of politics, in the same matter-of-fact manner as they had been asked to enter.

Nevertheless, from the first day, you can observe, that something has changed. So, if you wish to get a telephone connected, you get it in several days. Your words, which are as wise or as silly as they were before, are now broadcast, printed, commented on and sometimes even heard. It seems that your opinions could have a real impact, that you can change things. Many people unknown to you are now waiting for what you will say, and expect something from you. Because your supporters at least have bet on you, invested their hopes in you — and now, they expect and require something from you. They have a right to your attention or consideration, a right to your time.

Most of these changes are not unpleasant, they are flattering, and an intellectual might be tempted to see in them only an expression of appreciation, a justified reward for his ability and cleverness. If he succumbs to this first temptation, he is bound to commit another mistake. At the same time namely, perhaps without noticing, he has become a public person. As a public person, you are expected to say something, to state your position or sometimes even your opinion on virtually everything. There is nothing left now that you could consider as being beyond your competence, as not touching you, as pertaining to someone else. Maybe you have realized that all this is because you are a politician, a public

person, and in this case you have to learn rather quickly all these hideous phrases, sounding fine and signifying nothing, that we all so heartily detest. If you have not realized this and ascribe all this sudden interest in your sayings to their, that is, to your cleverness and real value, you cannot help but gradually become that weirdest sort of man — the omniscient. It is difficult to decide which of these two possibilities is more supportable for an intellectual, but for the intellectual's reputation and credibility, both are equally disastrous.

Intellectuals are trained and used to dealing with some matter, and to deal with it mostly in words. Ideally, they should see and understand more than others, and be able to explain it to them in the most disinterested way possible, that is, showing the whole ambiguity and complexity of the matter itself. At first glance it might seem that politicians are concerned with various matters, too, and that democratic politicians at least, deal with them mostly by speaking, that is in words. But in reality, between these two tasks there is almost no similarity at all.

To be sure, politicians (not demagogues) are concerned with matters, but their final aim must be to simplify these matters very much, up to the point where they would seem to be decidable. So a good politician tries first to understand, what the matter is — and this is the intellectual part of his job. That it is not the kernel of it can be seen from the fact that this task is in most cases entrusted to experts. Only what follows is the proper task of a politician: namely to weigh all the pros and cons of the matter, to choose an advantageous point of view for a decision, to blow up the advantages and to diminish the disadvantages, to find, or at worst even to buy, supporters, to convince colleagues (because most democratic decision-making is a collective business) and to present the decision to the public as the only possible one in the world, as natural as sunshine and as advantageous as an inheritance. If the whole operation is really to be a success, most people should be convinced that there was virtually nothing to be decided: it came out simply as that.

Of these three battlefronts on which the politician is permanently engaged, namely 1) with the matter 2) with his fellows politicians, and 3) with the public, it is the last one, which causes most trouble to the intellectual. This is mostly because the politician's public is not intellectual. That is, it does not share his love for complexity and ambiguity, his commitment to doubts, his need to be original and not to repeat himself. • It does not appreciate his ingenious witticisms and his play with words, not even his intellectual honesty (if any), but it appreciates clear cut decisions — just what an intellectual mostly abhors and avoids.

Whereas an honest intellectual dreams of influencing the course of public decision-making, too, he does it by explaining, by producing arguments and pointing out the difficulties. His goal is to convince. Even a politician can sometimes try to convince, but this is never the main thing. The important thing, the only thing you are obliged to do, is to take decisions. Not so much to convince the public that your decision is the right one, but rather to take away the burden of doubt and decision from your fellow citizens. If you take a closer look at it, there is even a sort of logic in it: problems which could be solved by calculation, computing and reasoning only, are almost never brought to a political decision. Politicians are expected to decide problems which cannot be solved in this way — mostly problems of the future, that nobody can reasonably foresee.

The public you are dealing with is not an impartial one. As we just mentioned, it is expecting from you things that nobody else can provide — e.g., that their lives will become better. People's future might depend on your decisions, particularly in troubled times. So you can very soon observe that this public is not simply a set of individuals whose opinions you could examine by statistical methods, finding clusters of similarities and so on. It appears to you much more as a strange sort of body, a living whole with its tastes and distastes, with hopes and fears, with a certain amount of patience and a lot of bad habits; as a body with stomach, guts and limbs, expecting to find in you what it lacks, that is, perhaps a bit of brain, but in any case a mouth, expressing not your, but their opinion. This is the strange phenomenon, usually called the "nation", which will forgive you anything, but never if you disappoint its expectations.

All possible errors can be forgiven you, but not if your nation does not feel secure with you. Thus, for example, lasting doubts and uncertainty, which are conditions of the trustworthiness of an intellectual, are forbidden to a politician. On the other hand, the ability to compromise, one of the highest virtues of a politician, seems to be a sort of treason for an intellectual. The same can be said of the ability to repeat endlessly the same idea in the same words on all possible occasions.

In normal human relations we expect other people to be in various moods, to be sometimes dissatisfied, sad, or even ashamed. Thanks to the TV, even a politician is nowadays "allowed" to display moods, but in a very different and always controlled way. And if a politician can manage to be "natural", be sure this is the most difficult of all his artifices.

Briefly, in the very moment you accepted a share of public power, you became a public person and you ceased to belong to yourself. You accepted a role and you are to play it, in our times all the day through. You are a symbol for millions of people and you are not allowed to disappoint the nation. This is the main reason why it is so extremely difficult to be a politician, if you are an intellectual and not willing to change your way of thinking.

But let us take one more step. To be an efficient politician and intellectual at the same time is not only difficult, but also undesirable, often dangerous. Remember the old dream of so many philosophers and intellectuals of holding power in their hands. From Plato's "custodians" up to the philosophers of the French Enlightenment, there is always the same idea: we, the intellectuals, we know better. Let us rule and you shall obey; that is, in silence. Alexis de Tocqueville in his "Ancien régime" admirably described this ambition and its share in the bloody outcome of the Revolution. On the other hand, the whole Western tradition, at least in its good times, has always tried to hold these two "powers" separate.

i Translated into modern terms it would mean separating practical politics as cleanly as possible from the tasks of the intellectual: from the true, from the beautiful and from the good. Politics, in contrast, is the art of the possible, which is only partially true, the art of the viable, which is mostly not beautiful, and the art of the attainable, which is seldom simply good.

To this conclusion, which might sound too disappointing and pessimistic, two supplementary remarks are necessary. First, it does not mean that politics is a dirty affair, or that it must be immoral. Nothing like that. Morals are always a necessary measure, the abiding rule for politics. It means only that politics cannot be as moral as some idealists might imagine, simply because it is a truly human activity. And if politics is not to be dirty, this fact has to be acknowledged. The second remark is rather personal. There are exceptional situations, in which it may be simply a duty to take political responsibility. So what we did in 1989 was not a mistake. It was a short, but invaluable experience, which allows me to observe politics now from the outside with much more understanding and in a much more complacent way, than I have been able to do before.

Prague