

Let me begin by presenting a very schematic picture of what may be called modern liberal-democratic-humanist-individualist-secularist political practice. The picture will have many rough edges; many qualifications will have to be made and many voices of reservations will be raised. But I believe, the picture, on the whole, is a correct one. Also I shall not be interested in expounding the liberal humanist philosophy as such or in its justification. I am more interested in placing before you an idea rough as it will necessarily have to be of the socio-political milieu which finds one kind of articulation in such a philosophy. The main features of this picture, as I see it, are as follows:

(1) there is not just one supreme human good there are many goods, many values; and they have all to be respected; these values are connected with different "interests" of different groups constituting a political community.

(2) a political community will thus be characterized by conflict rather than harmony.

(3) the centres of political activity in a modern nation are the cities, and the lack of harmony of the political community is reflected in the life of the cities in a great variety of ways: one of the ways in which it is reflected is in the different, more or less unconnected roles that a citizen has to play at different times of a day of her or his life, or on different *days* of her or his life. (e.g. a wife, a husband, a petty bureaucrat, a teacher, a typist, a committee man, a "friend" and so on). It is also reflected in the disparities of many kinds that exist in a modern city.

(4) political activity is directed primarily towards the acquisition of power of course, in principle, by liberal humanist methods, i.e., through democratic elections, and remaining in power; and its primary concern is to reach a "just" equation of interests which, in real terms, is "management of conflicts".

(5) conflicts more or less unresolvable exist not just within the political community, but between political communities, nations.\*

(6) problems of "internal and external security" are, therefore, major concerns of the political

\*they are more or less unresolvable because they frequently arise from divergence of interest of such radical kind, that there does not exist any common ground for a *dialogue*.

## POLITICIANS AND IMMORALITY

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governance of the nation.

(7) both these "demand" that actions of a certain kind which may be morally reprehensible in themselves, e.g., of economic and physical coercion, should be legitimate weapons in the hands of politicians—people who have acquired the power to govern. It is impossible to delimit the range of such actions; as we all know physical torture and killings (acts of violence, for short) are frequently not excluded.

(8) of course, one must not forget that a distinction is made between violence that is legitimate and violence that is illegitimate. This distinction is sometimes put in terms of "structured" violence and "unstructured" violence.\* The violence that is dispensed by the courts of law is part of structured violence. But the distinction, in practice, between structured violence

and unstructured violence is anything but clear. Think of the acts of violence of the varieties of "police" forces that we have in our country, of the intelligence agencies, of the army. Are all of them cases of structured violence? I am sure it will be generally agreed that many, if not most, of them are not. I do not have to cite examples here. Thus, it is an accepted, if sometimes only tacitly and unopenly accepted, fact that the politician who takes decisions or causes decisions to be taken has unstructured violence as one of the weapons in his armoury of weapons with which to govern the country.

Given this scenario incomplete and terribly impressionistic as it is how are we to conceive of the

relationship between the practice of politics and morality? Of course, politicians all over the world do all kinds of morally distasteful things—they take bribes, distribute favours to their relatives and friends, incite riots or have them incited, and, thereby, are the cause of the death of innocent people and so on. But these, it will be argued, are neither peculiar to politicians, nor do they have anything essentially to do with

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what would be considered political activity proper. There is a large element of truth in this. But the fact that politicians do these things and frequently get away with them is in itself interesting. No doubt, connected with it is also the fact that there is no, in any adequate or strong sense of the term, professional code of conduct associated with the practice of politics as there is, e.g., for the

medical or the legal profession. It may be said that in the case of the latter, a strong code of conduct becomes necessary because these professions are concerned with vital interests of individuals and that not only are they so concerned but they must be clearly seen to be so concerned. This last is important and it shows that a strong and adequate articulation of a code of conduct in relation to these professions is motivated, in part at least, by powerfully selfish considerations. But isn't politics concerned with vital interests of citizens? So it is. But these interests are allowed to be so diverse and frequently so cleverly manipulated (often in conjunction with another equally ambiguous "profession" ambiguous insofar as a code of conduct is concerned—the profession, namely, of business) that even to *appear to be morally respectable* may sometimes be a

hindrance rather than an aid to the politician.

Let us, then, leave aside these morally reprehensible deeds (including deeds of violence) which politicians do or at least initiate, but which, nonetheless are not peculiar to politicians or characteristic of political activity as such. It must, however, be said that our politicians seem frequently to be responsible for such deeds and sometimes they are even applauded for them. Our academics and intellectuals are occasionally outraged by them; but, for the most part, there is only a cynical acceptance of them. "Only crooks can and do get to be politicians and what can you expect of crooks?" Such is the helpless response of many.

But supposing our practice of politics is miraculously cleansed; it would indeed need a miracle for this to be possible; but in logic, or as we say, in principle, it is possible; the question of whether the good man, the man of virtues, can be a genuinely effective player of the game of politics still remains. By a practitioner of politics I do not mean here the small-time party-worker or the lobbyist, but people who take decisions which are far-reaching whether they recognize them to be so or not and either implement them themselves or have them implemented.

An essential moral dubiousness seems, of course, to characterize the very hub of politics as a professional practice, namely, the politician's commitment to power.

Frequently, of course, it is easy enough to see that a politician's pronouncements and actions although clothed in terms of "interest" of people or of the nation, are really and quite obviously in the interest of the politician's personal ambition. But a more pervasive and morally distorting fact of political life is the impossibility to tell whether a particular issue important to national life has really ever been considered purely on its merit, because considerations of the consequences (for power) of any decision must form an essential part of the motivation behind the decision; or at least this must be the assumption of any intelligent onlooker.

But given this central moral ambiguity in the profession of politics there are specific spheres, large and small, where the politician,

in the course of his political activity, must occasionally take decisions which are in themselves morally undesirable and might involve large-scale violence, even if, of a somewhat invisible kind. Take projects which are said to be "worthy" and in pursuit of "just equation of interests" that we talked about earlier. Think of the Narmada project. In this particular case, of course, enough alarm has been raised among enough number of people, for the politicians to have "shelved" the issue. But here again it is difficult for them to escape the charge of lacking the courage to take a decision one way or the other. But decisions have to be taken, and when they are taken there may be large-scale victimization, e.g., when scores of villages are destroyed by creating an artificial lake, when thousands of tribesmen are evicted from their traditional homes in the forests. In such cases in spite of so-called compensations, the violence involved, though in a way invisible, may be so profound as to lead, first, to the degeneration, and then, to the virtual decimation of an entire population. The question, "what kind of people do we need at the helm of affairs who will take decisions such as these?", acquires special urgency, although we hardly ever ask it? If we insist as, I suppose, most of us will, we need morally sensitive people even for decisions such as these, then there are only two possibilities: (i) that such people must suppress their moral sensitivities on occasions such as these (the possibility of this, in terms of moral psychology or phenomenology of morals, is extremely doubtful, to say the least); or (ii) that they justify their decisions in purely utilitarian terms, but (a) utilitarian calculations are notorious for their manifold uncertainty, and (b) moral sensitivity of the kind that we are talking about has, in any case, no place in the utilitarian scheme of things. Perhaps, then, the best we can say is that we need people who are ruthless and have irremediable moral blind spots, but are nonetheless disposed to act, in a large measure, at least, in the interest of the nation and not in his own interest. But I think, there is deep phenomenological truth in the suggestion that the combination of ruthless moral blindness and a disposition to self-less motivation is almost impossible to conceive.

I have not even talked about the

"small" acts of deceits, of blackmail, of false moral postures all done in the interest of the party, of the electorate, of stability and so on which are part of almost everyday political activity in our country. This is because, I am interested primarily in acts of violence. But the line dividing the two is extremely thin, and frequently the former logically merges into the latter. It might be said that I am drawing a picture that is cynical in the extreme. There is, of course, a large element of truth in this. But the point really is that given the liberal-humanist-individualist-secularist philosophy that informs—at some level—our contemporary political organisation, and the objective of "just equation of interests" of the latter, with conflict rather than harmony being assumed to be the ultimate mode of human existence, a picture such as the one I have drawn seems inescapable. In mitigation one might perhaps say that whether or not the good man will rule depends very much on the general political culture of a nation. But, this latter, while it does vary from nation to nation, the difference, so it seems to me, is one only of degree and there is a dangerous tendency towards global uniformity aided and abetted, of course, by the nexus of science, technology and big business.

In conclusion, I want to talk about the more visible and palpable acts of violence which are done at the instance or the nod of the politician for the sake, as it is said, of internal and external security. Here again, the difference between structured and unstructured violence might be invoked. But this distinction, just as much as the distinction between internal and external security, is extremely blurred. Are killings in so-called "encounters" part of structured violence; and is the "execution" of a "criminal" carried out by ULFA, or the LTTE or the Naxals part of unstructured violence? And the foreign hand is espied everywhere just as much as the dirty hand. It may be said, when

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violence and especially violence that is totally mindless and appears almost to be an end-in-itself—becomes so widespread and almost the way of life of substantial sections of the people, it can be dealt with only with violence both structured and unstructured. There is obvious truth in this. But here again, for the person who still believes in the possibility of an internal relation between politics and morality, the question, what moral qualities must the politician have to deal with situations such as these, might still be a pressing one. And the answer, quite obviously, will be one that will be greatly discouraging. One mitigating consideration might be that the politician whose actions and decisions are informed by a serious contemplation of her or his (and her or his colleagues') role in bringing

about situations of this kind is to be preferred to one whose actions and decisions are not so informed. Perhaps. But suppose the situation in the country is dramatically changed; and instances of violence in the life of the country have become so rare as to be very minor aberrations. Even if

such a situation were miraculously to come about, there would still be occasions when the politician for "reasons of state", for the sake of internal and external security might have to have acts of violence "organized", a murder done, a person "silenced" and so on. To say that such occasions need not arise is to fly in the face of large empirical facts. The very complexity of the organization of the modern state, the "delicacy" of international relationships, and the great variety of forces and interests at work make it palpably possible that such occasions *would* arise. The question, then, is: can a man of moral character have such acts organized and yet retain, phenomenologically at least, a sense of moral self-respect and rectitude? An inclination to answer the question in the negative would, I think, be largely justified. But an

external liberal-humanist justification of the case for the moralist politician can still be sought in the following: A distinction must be drawn between ordering a criminal act done and doing the act oneself. A politician may certainly find himself in a position where the interests of internal and external security demand that he order a criminal act done. But a situation need never arise where he himself is involved actively in the act and, in fact, we may even imagine him to be actively morally reluctant in even the issuing of the order. So, the politician can still retain, as it were, his moral core even if he has occasionally and no doubt with active reluctance to have acts of criminal violence ordered. To have reached such a point of sophistication in the argument, is, I think, also to have reached a point of intellectual despair which seems to be the general destiny of what we call modernity.

What then? I shall end by saying two things: (i) We must clearly recognize the fact that moral compromises of very radical kinds are part of the core and not just the periphery of the practice of politics: a clear awareness of this is certainly much better than a pious hope that one day we will surely have the good ruler. Secondly, it is conceivable that the moral ambiguity which I said was internal to the very heart of the practice of politics namely, the politician's commitment to power might lose some of its practical dangers if the power is as widely distributed as possible. Decentralization of political power is something that we do indeed talk about a great deal, but it hardly ever happens; and the reasons for this I suspect are far deeper than we would normally like to think.\*

\* The reader will easily recognize the similarity between some of the arguments used and arguments employed by Bernard Williams in his paper, "Politics and Moral Character". But there are two remarks to be made here: (i) Williams appears to believe that there is a qualitative difference between the West-European-North-American situation and, say, the Indian situation. I disagree with him here; (ii) some of his arguments are held together by the thinnest of thread of sophistication. I hope I have succeeded in breaking this thread at some places easy as the task might be thought to be.