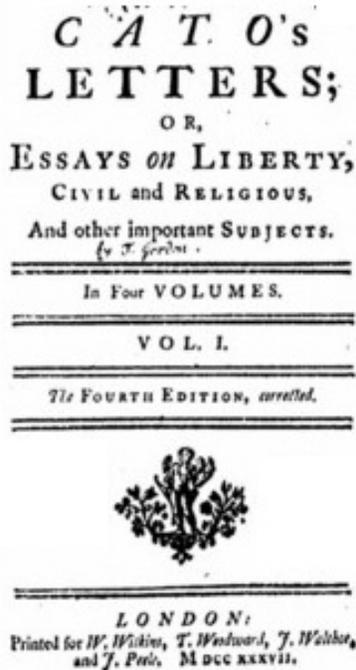


THE BEST OF THE OLL #61

John Trenchard, “On the Nature of Political Parties” (1721)
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“Tis worth no man's time to serve a party, unless he can now and then get good jobs by it. This, I can safely say, has been the constant principle and practice of every leading patriot, ever since I have been capable of observing publick transactions.”



John Trenchard (1662-1723)

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[February, 2014]

Editor's Introduction

John Trenchard (1662-1723) was a radical Whig and Commonwealthman who, along with his collaborator Thomas Gordon (1692-1750), were important voices defending constitutionalism and individual liberty in the 1720s in England. Trenchard came from a prominent family, went to Trinity College, Dublin, and briefly served in the House of Commons. He worked as a journalist in the 1690s writing works criticising the idea of standing armies and the political power of the established church. Trenchard co-wrote *The Independent Whig* (1720-21) and *Cato's Letters* (1720-23) with Gordon. He was a defender of the idea of liberty against political corruption, imperialism and militarism in the early 18th century.

Trenchard and Gordon adopted the nom de plume of "Cato", after Cato the Younger (95-46 B.C.) who had been the foe of Julius Caesar and a champion of liberty and republican principles. They published 144 of their essays or "Letters" which had appeared originally in the *London Journal* and later in the *British Journal* between 1720 to 1723. They were collected and published as *Cato's Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects* which were very popular in the American colonies.

In this Letter Trenchard warned that the true nature of political parties was to offer its members an opportunity to plunder the ordinary taxpayer by seeking plush jobs for themselves and kick-backs for their friends. He makes a number of observations which are very "public choice" in nature, such as the claim that people seek political office in order to get themselves good jobs, that they trade favours with each other in order to better their positions, that both sides in politics share a common interest in the spoils of office, that members of a party will defend even corrupt members for the sake of party unity, and so on. Trenchard wishes to expose these practices and to warn the ordinary taxpayer that they are being duped when the various parties attempt to enroll them in their battles and that they have been betrayed too often in the past to trust anybody again in the present.

This letter of advice is not intended for those who share already in the publick spoils, or who, like jackals, hunt down the lion's prey, that they may have the picking of the bones, when their masters are glutted. But I would persuade the poor, the injured, the distressed people, to be no longer the dupes and property of hypocrites and traitors. But very few can share in the wages of iniquity, and all the rest must suffer; the people's interest is the publick interest; it signifies the same thing: Whatever these betrayers of their country get, the people must lose; and, what is worse, must lose a great deal more than the others can get; for such conspiracies and extortions cannot be successfully carried on, without destroying or injuring trade, perverting justice, corrupting the guardians of the publick liberty, and the almost total dissolution of the principles of government.

**Trenchard, “The Leaders of Parties,
their usual Views. Advice to all Parties
to be no longer misled” (Feb. 11, 1721)¹**

Sir,

The wise Sancho Pancha desired that his subjects, in the promised island, might be all blacks, because he would sell them. And this seems to be the first modest, and, as I think, the only reasonable desire of the leaders of all parties; for no man will be at the expence and fatigue of body and conscience, which is necessary to lead a faction, only to be disturbed and annoyed by them.

’Tis worth no man’s time to serve a party, unless he can now and then get good jobs by it.” This, I can safely say, has been the constant principle and practice of every leading patriot, ever since I have been capable of observing publick transactions

A very great authority has told us,[1] that “’Tis worth no man’s time to serve a party, unless he can now and then get good jobs by it.” This, I can safely say, has been the constant principle and practice of every leading patriot, ever since I have been capable of observing publick transactions; the primum mobile, the alpha and omega of all their actions: They all professed to have in view only the publick good; yet every one shewed he only meant his own; and all the while the great as well as little mob, the procerum turba mobilium, contended as fiercely for their leaders, as if their happiness or misery depended upon the face, the clothes, or title of the persons who robbed and betrayed them. Thus the highwayman said to the traveller, “Pray, Sir, leave your watch and money in my hands; or else, by G —, you will be robbed.”

Pound a fool in a mortar, and he comes out never the wiser; no experience will make the bulk of mankind so, or put them upon their guard; they will be caught over and over again by the same baits and stale stratagems: No sooner is a party betrayed by one head, but they rail at him, and set up another; and when this has served them in the same manner, they choose a third; and put full confidence in every one of them successively, though they all make the same use of their credulity; that is, put a price upon their calves’ heads, and sell them; which, however, they have the less reason to complain of, because they would have all done the same.

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I assure you, Sir, that I have not the least hopes in this letter to make men honest; but I would gladly teach them a little more wit; that is, I would advise any one who is contented to be sold, that he receive the money himself, and take good care of one, whatever becomes of his neighbours; as some discreet persons have lately done. Whatever bargains are struck up amongst the betrayers of their country, we must find the money, and pay both sides. How wise and advantageous would it then be for us, not to interest ourselves in the agreements or squabbles of ambitious men, who are building their fortunes upon our ruin? Once upon a time, a French ambassador desired an audience of the Grand Vizier, and in pompous French fustian notified to him, that his master had won a great victory over the Germans; to which that wise minister answered laconically, “What is it to me, if the whole

¹ John Trenchard, “The Leaders of Parties, their usual Views. Advice to all Parties to be no longer misled,” in *Cato’s Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects. Four volumes in Two*, edited and annotated by Ronald Hamowy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995). Vol. 1. No. 16, Saturday, February 11, 1721, <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1237/64453/1597439>>.

herd of unbelievers, like dogs, mutually worry one another, so that my master's head be safe?"

This letter of advice is not intended for those who share already in the publick spoils, or who, like jackals, hunt down the lion's prey, that they may have the picking of the bones, when their masters are glutted. But I would persuade the poor, the injured, the distressed people, to be no longer the dupes and property of hypocrites and traitors. But very few can share in the wages of iniquity, and all the rest must suffer; the people's interest is the publick interest; it signifies the same thing: Whatever these betrayers of their country get, the people must lose; and, what is worse, must lose a great deal more than the others can get; for such conspiracies and extortions cannot be successfully carried on, without destroying or injuring trade, perverting justice, corrupting the guardians of the publick liberty, and the almost total dissolution of the principles of government.

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Few can receive the advantages arising from publick misfortunes; and therefore methinks few should desire them. Indeed, I can easily see how men of desperate circumstances, or men guilty of desperate crimes, can find their account in a general confusion of all things. I can see how those priests, who aim at tyranny, can find their interest in the loss of publick liberty, in the restraint of the press, and in introducing a religion which destroys Christianity: There are reasons too at hand, why ambitious men should, per fas & nefas, grasp at the possession of immense wealth, high honours, and exorbitant power: But that the gentry, the body of the people in a free nation, should

become tools and instruments of knaves and pick-pockets; should list themselves in their quarrels, and fight their battles; and this too, often at the expence, and by the violation of good neighbourhood, near relation, private friendship: That men of great estates and quality, for small and trifling considerations, and sometimes none at all, should promote wild, villainous projects, to the ruin of themselves and country, by making precarious their own titles to their lives, estates, and liberties, is something so stupendous, that it must be thought impossible, if daily experience did not convince us that it is more than possible.

I have often seen honest Tories foolishly defending knavish Tories; and untainted Whigs protecting corrupt Whigs, even in instances where they acted against the principles of all Whigs; and by that means depreciated Whiggism itself, and gave the stupid herd occasion to believe that they had no principles at all, but were only a factious combination for preferment and power.

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It is high time, at last, for the bubbles of all parties, for Whigs and Tories, for High Church and Low Church, to come to an éclaircissement, and no longer suffer themselves to be bought and sold by their drivers: Let them cease to be calves and sheep, and they will not be used like calves and sheep. If they can be persuaded now and then to confer notes, they will find, that for the most part the differences between them are not material; that they take only different measures to attain the same ends; that they have but one common interest, which is the interest of their country; and that is, to be freed from oppression, and

to punish their oppressors: Whose practice, on the contrary, will always be to form parties, and blow up factions to mutual animosities, that they may find protection in those animosities.

Let us not therefore, for the time to come, suffer ourselves to be engaged in empty and pernicious contentions; which can only tend to make us the property and harvest of pickpockets: Let us learn to value an honest man of another party, more than a knave of our own: Let the only contention be, who shall be most ready to spew out their own rogues; and I will be answerable that all other differences will soon be at an end. Indeed, there had been no such thing as party now in England, if we had not been betrayed by those whom we trusted.

Through the villainy and knavish designs of leaders, this nation has lost several glorious opportunities of rescuing the constitution, and settling it upon a firm and solid basis: Let us not therefore, by the like practices, lose the present favourable offer: Let us make earnings of our misfortunes, and accept our calamities as an opportunity thrown into our laps by indulgent providence, to save ourselves; and not again foolishly and ungratefully reject and spurn at the intimations and invitations of heaven, to preserve our prince and country.

Machiavel tells us, that no government can long subsist, but by recurring often to its first principles; but this can never be done while men live at ease and in luxury; for then they cannot be persuaded to see distant dangers, of which they feel no part. The conjunctures proper for such reformatations, are when men are awakened by misfortunes, and frightened with the approach and near view of present evils; then they will wish for remedies, and their minds are prepared to receive them, to hear reasons, and to fall into measures proposed by wise men for their security.

The great authority just quoted informs us what measures and expedients are necessary to save a state under such exigencies: He tells us, that as a tyranny cannot be established but by destroying Brutus; so a free government is not to be preserved but by destroying Brutus's sons. Let us therefore put on a resolution equal to the mighty occasion: Let us exert a spirit worthy of Britons, worthy of freemen who deserve liberty. Let us take advantage of the opportunity, while men's resentments boil high, whilst lesser animosities seem to be laid aside, and most men are sick of party and party-leaders; and let us, by all

proper methods, exemplarily punish the parricides, and avowed enemies of all mankind.

Let neither private acquaintance, personal alliance, or party combination, stand between us and our duty to our country: Let all those who have a common interest in the publick safety, join in common measures to defend the publick safety: Let us pursue to disgrace, destruction, and even death, those who have brought this ruin upon us, let them be ever so great, or ever so many: Let us stamp and deep engrave, in characters legible to all Europe at present, and to all posterity hereafter, what vengeance is due to crimes, which have no less objects in view than the ruin of nations, and the destruction of millions: They have made many bold, desperate, and wicked attempts to destroy us; let us strike one honest and bold stroke to destroy them.

Though the designs of the conspirators should be laid as deep as the center, though they should raise hell itself in their quarrel, and should fetch legions of votaries from thence to avow their proceedings; yet let us not leave the pursuit, till we have their skins and estates: We know, by past experience, that there are those amongst us, who will be glad to quit the chase, when our villains, like beavers, drop what they are usually hunted for; but the nation is now too much provoked, and too much injured, to suffer themselves to be again so betrayed.

We have heaven to direct us, a glorious King to lead us, and a wise and faithful Parliament to assist and protect us: Whilst we have such a King, and such a Parliament, every worthy Briton cries out aloud,

Manus haec inimica tyrannis Ense petit placidam, sub libertate quietem.[2]

T. I am, &c.

Endnotes

[1.] This was said to have been spoken by a certain Lord Chancellor in former times.

[2. Editor's note] This was the motto of Algernon Sidney, "*Manus haec inimica tyrannis, Ense petit placidam cum libertate quietem*" (This hand, enemy to tyrants, By the sword seeks calm peacefulness with liberty).

Further Information

SOURCE

The edition used for this extract: *Cato's Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. Four volumes in Two, edited and annotated by Ronald Hamowy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995). Vol. 1. No. 16, "The Leaders of Parties, their usual Views. Advice to all Parties to be no longer misled," Saturday, February 11, 1721, <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1237/64453/1597439>>.

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FURTHER READING

Other works by John Trenchard (1662-1723) <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/person/3799>>.

School of Thought: 18th Century Commonwealthmen <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/collection/34>>

"The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State."
[Ludwig von Mises, "Liberty and Property" (1958)]



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