Cicero and Burke on Politics as a Vocation*

Por Mary Ann Glendon

When I go to a lecture, I always like to know what motivated the lecturer to study the topic he or she is addressing. So let me begin with a few words about what drew me to Cicero and Edmund Burke.

As a law professor, I have known many young men and women over the years who chose to study law because they were absolutely convinced that they wanted to go into politics. Many of them went on to realize their ambitions. But many of the most intelligent, principled, and promising young people change their minds by the time they graduate. What they often say is that they turned aside from politics after wrestling with questions like: How could I and my family handle the politics of personal destruction? Is politics such a dirty business that I would have to choose between being contaminated or marginalized? Could I have a decent family life? Are conditions so unfavorable that I couldn't make a difference? Would I have to compromise so much in order to get into a position to be effective, that I would become a different person? Would I lose sight of my highest aims, betray my principles, even lose my soul as I strive to get and keep public office?

After listening to so many students discuss those questions over the years, I began to study the biographies of remarkable statespersons of the past to see how they dealt with challenges similar to the ones our students today find so daunting.

As so often happens with research, however, you start out looking for answers to one question and along the way you discover other things that are equally interesting. What I found particularly fascinating about Cicero and Burke was that they are among the very few individuals in human history who have excelled in what Aristotle called the two most choice-worthy vocations, politics and philosophy—but, unlike Aristotle, each insisted that politics as the superior vocation.

While Burke was still in his 20s, he had written two well-received monographs on philosophical topics. But he regarded them only as stepping stones to public life. A man who "lives in a college after his mind is sufficiently stocked with learning," he once said, "is like a man who having built and rigged a ship, should lock her up in dry dock."

Cicero explained his option for politics in an essay dedicated to his son. “The statesman's life is more admirable and more illustrious,” he said, “even though some people think that a life passed quietly in the study of the highest arts is happier." He continued, "No philosophical discourse is so fine that it deserves to be set above the public law and customs of a well-ordered state." Philosophers can spin theories about

justice, decency, restraint, and fortitude until the end of their days, but statesmen are the ones who must actually set the conditions to foster the virtues that are necessary to a well-functioning polity. That, he said, is why a life of public service is "the course that has always been followed by the best men."

Now, given what we know about Rome in Cicero's day, there is serious reason to doubt his claim that the best men were going into public service. The fact is that, in the late Roman Republic, as in present-day western nations, many of the most capable citizens were declining to enter public life. Some abstained out of disgust with public corruption; others, like Cicero's closest friend Atticus, chose to take advantage of opportunities to live a private life in comfort and luxury.

Cicero did not argue with Atticus and other friends who tried to dissuade him from politics by pointing out that the Roman political arena was filled with corrupt characters. Instead, he turned their objection around: "What stronger reason could brave and high-minded men have for entering politics than the determination not to give in to the wicked, and not to allow the state to be torn apart by such people?"

Like the students whose concerns prompted my research, both Cicero and Burke regarded the study of law as the best preparation for a career in politics. Both of them were “new men”--talented outsiders from respectable families in the provinces of their respective empires. And both were pushed toward law study in Rome and London respectively by fathers who were eager to help their gifted sons succeed on a larger stage.

Like many politically ambitious students in today’s law schools, both Cicero and Burke complained that they found their legal studies tedious. They resented the long hours they had to spend on technical material, and they both gravitated to the places where they could study the oratorical skills that would later make them famous--Cicero to the Roman Forum and Burke to the House of Commons.

And, just as law students do today, both young men started to think about how they wanted to present themselves to the world. Every fall, when the job-interview season begins in American law schools, a remarkable metamorphosis takes place in the graduating seniors. The alterations in their clothing, hairstyles--and sometimes teeth and noses--can be so drastic as to make it difficult to recognize the young person one once knew. Occasionally a young man or woman will adopt a new name in time for it to appear on his or her diploma.

In Cicero's case, many of his friends told him that if he wanted to go into politics, he would have to change his surname, which apparently derived from an ancestor who had a wart like a chick pea (*cicer*) on the end of his nose. They said it was a ridiculous name, not nearly dignified enough for a politician. But Cicero told them that he planned to make it more famous than those of Scaurus (knobby ankles) and Catulus (puppy).

What did worry him was his liability to severe attacks of stage fright and his generally frail state of health. As a beginning advocate, he won many cases. But gastro-intestinal problems afflicted him to the point where, as he later wrote, "I was at that time

not strong in body, and friends and doctors begged me to give up speaking in the courts. But I felt I would run any risk rather than abandon my hope of fame as a speaker."

And so, he interrupted his promising legal career and devoted two full years to a program of self-improvement. With his brother and a few friends, he traveled to Greece and Rhodes where he studied philosophy and rhetoric with the most famous philosophers and orators of his time; he adopted an exercise regimen that he followed for the rest of his life; and by trial and error he found a diet that soothed his delicate stomach. By the time he returned to Rome, he had learned to control his voice, his style was improved, and his health was restored. With his new confidence--and his marriage to a wealthy and well-connected Roman woman--he was ready to resume his career in the Forum and to break into politics.

In Edmund Burke's case, things were more complicated. He was not just a new man from the provinces, he was an Irishman determined to make his way in England where prejudice ran high against the Irish, and especially against Irish Catholics. For him, the question was not just "How do I want to present myself" but "How much of myself can I afford to reveal."

That sort of question arises today for many students, not only when they are preparing their cv.s for the job market, but even earlier when they are filling out law school applications. Should one mention, for example, having worked for a conservative political party, or membership in a pro-life group, when applying to leading law schools where very different views prevail?

For an Irish outsider like Burke in eighteenth century London, the path to success was filled with snares. Burke was born and raised in Ireland where the English had imposed a harsh system of Penal Laws that, among other things, barred Catholics from voting or holding public office. The harshness of that system and the barriers it posed to economic advancement were such that Burke's father, a lawyer, registered as a convert to Protestantism, took a public oath in which he repudiated the religion of his ancestors, and baptized his sons in the Protestant Church of Ireland. Burke's mother and sister, however, remained practicing Catholics throughout their lives.

It is only recently –thanks to new research by Conor Cruise O'Brien--that the full story of Burke’s complicated loyalties has come to light. Previous biographies of Edmund Burke had simply described him as a Protestant whose father was a Protestant solicitor in Dublin. But the reality was much more complex. In fact, as O'Brien points out, the life of families like the Burkes in Ireland was comparable in some respects to that of the Murano Jews in Spain.

Conversion to Protestantism sufficed to open certain doors, but converts remained suspect--often with good reason--of being crypto-Catholics. Children had to be taught habits of secrecy from an early age. A letter from Burke at age 16 to his best friend is revealing: "We live in a world where everyone is on the catch, and the only way to be safe is to be silent in any affair of consequence."

Burke's father did everything he could to smooth the path for Edmund, sending him to Trinity College Dublin, and then shipping him off at age 21 to study law in London. To his father's great disappointment, Edmund did not take to the law, but he loved London. And he soon found to his delight that a man who had a way with words could make a decent living there. By his late 20s, he had published numerous articles that attracted the attention of the famous Dr. Samuel Johnson who was to become a good friend.

He also acquired a reputation as a great talker. It was said that the men who frequented London's lively coffee houses regarded Burke as the only man in London who was a match for Dr. Johnson in conversation.

Burke's skill with a pen also gained him the attention of politicians. At the age of thirty, he was hired as the assistant to a member of Parliament. But as luck would have it, one of his first tasks was to prepare a position paper on Ireland, a subject on which he had strong views. So he was immediately faced with the problem of whether to suppress certain of his own convictions in order to advance in, and ultimately be able to influence, a hostile environment. In later years, he received much criticism for saying in that report that the provisions of the Penal Laws excluding Catholics from public office were "just and necessary." His defenders, however, point out that the report did criticize the Penal Laws, and the concession in question was probably made to secure the agreement of Burke's employer to the other points in the paper.

Shortly thereafter, Burke moved a giant step up the political ladder, by landing a position as secretary to the Marquess of Rockingham, the Whig leader who had just become the head of a coalition government. But rumors about Burke's background almost derailed the appointment. Some of Rockingham's associates told him that the young man was an Irish adventurer, whose real name was O'Bourke, and that he was not only a secret Catholic, but worst of all, a concealed Jesuit!

One gets a sense of how very precarious Burke's position was in those days from the way he replied to a relative who begged him to intervene in the prosecution of a cousin in Ireland who had eloped with a Protestant heiress, a capital offense under the Penal Laws. In explaining why he could not help, Burke implored his uncle to understand "how newly and almost as a stranger I am come among these people, and how many efforts have been made, with malice and envy, to ruin me." He said any effort to influence the authorities in a case involving "the most unpopular point in the world, could have no other effect than to do me infinite prejudice, without the least probability of succeeding."

Rumors concerning his Catholic affiliations haunted Burke throughout his political career. Towards the end of his life, it was with a certain pride that he wrote: "I was not swaddled and rocked and dandled into a legislator….At every step of my progress in life I was obliged to show my passport, and again and again to prove my sole title to the honour of being useful to my country." Political enemies pried into his personal affairs, and cartoonists never failed to portray him in clerical garb, wearing a Roman collar, and

(in case anyone didn't know he was Irish) with a whiskey bottle in one hand and a potato in the other.

It didn't help that Burke had married a woman who, like his mother and sister, was a lifelong practicing Catholic. Unlike Cicero, whose marriage to a difficult but wealthy woman advanced his career, Burke married for love. He incurred some political cost thereby, but by all accounts enjoyed a close and companionate marriage.

Both Cicero and Burke repeatedly had to struggle with the problem of when, whether, and how far to compromise their principles, either for the sake of advancing the causes in which they believed, or to promote their own political fortunes.

Cicero, in his treatise *On Duties*, left us some of his thoughts about the difficulty of deciding what to do "when apparent right clashes with apparent advantage." Some situations, he says, are perplexingly difficult to assess. Sometimes a course of action generally regarded as wrong turns out right. Sometimes a step that looks natural and right may turn out not to be right after all. He described himself as seeking the highest degree of probability within the range of the possible, aiming for the best, while accepting that he must often settle for less. He pointed to what is perhaps the key difference between the statesman and the philosopher--the philosopher can deliberate endlessly but the statesman must decide, act, and take responsibility for his decisions and actions.

Not surprisingly, Cicero was often criticized for what some today call “flip-flopping”—sudden reversals of position. Not surprisingly, he bridled at the accusation. On one such occasion, he wrote to the person who had attacked him, "At sea, it is good sailing to run before the gale, even if the ship cannot make harbor; but if she *can* make harbor by changing tack, only a fool would risk shipwreck by holding the original course rather than changing it and still reaching his destination. Unchanging consistency of standpoint has never been considered a virtue in great statesmen."

Cicero's career certainly saw many changes of tack. They were viewed by some as prudent responses to shifts in the political environment, and denounced by others as expedient, cowardly or hypocritical. By his own account, there were occasions when he failed to live up to his own publicly professed standards, and in private correspondence, he often berated himself for falling short of his own ideals. One famous example occurred when Cicero was at the apex of his power in the highest office he ever held, that of Consul. In the course of restoring order after the suppression of the Catiline conspiracy, Cicero ordered five of the co-conspirators to be executed without trial. It was a step that he justified as an emergency measure, but it also violated the very Roman laws and traditions that he was often at pains to defend.

On the other hand, there were also times when Cicero refused to compromise his principles, and paid a high price. Most notably, he declined the invitation of Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus to make their triumvirate a foursome. They were eager to have the benefit of association with Cicero's prestige, which was then at a high point.

Cicero was tempted. But the triumvirs had already begun reducing the power of the Senate, consuls and the tribunes, and he was unwilling to have a part in activities that he considered so destructive to the republic. The triumvirs, in turn, declined to support him when Catiline's cronies got their revenge by obtaining passage of a law--specifically aimed at Cicero--that retroactively sentenced to death or exile anyone who had condemned a Roman citizen to death without trial. Cicero had to flee to Greece; his property was confiscated, and his fine home on the Palatine hill was destroyed.

Later, after Cicero had been pardoned and restored to his seat in the Senate, he was faced with another difficult choice: whether to support Octavian or Mark Antony, who were then engaged in bitter rivalry. Cicero did not regard either of those men as offering much hope for the preservation of republican institutions. But eventually he gambled on Octavian's youth and possible malleability. Once committed to Octavian, he began whipping up sentiment against Antony in the series of speeches now known as the Philippics.

Unfortunately for Cicero, Octavian and Antony patched up their differences, and Antony, bent on revenge, ordered Cicero to be killed. Octavian refused to intervene when, by Antony's order, Cicero's head and the hands that wrote the Philippics were cut off and put on display in the Forum.

Possibly Octavian felt some shame about his acquiescence in that affair, for, years later, when he had become Augustus Caesar and ruler of the Roman Empire, he came upon his grandson reading a volume of Cicero's. As Plutarch tells the story, the boy attempted to hide the book under his clothes, but Augustus took the book and stood for a long time looking through it. Then he handed it back to the boy, saying, "My child, this was a learned man--a learned man, and a lover of his country."

Burke never rose so high in politics, nor fell so calamitously as Cicero. But his causes, too, often required him to swim against the current. And he frequently had to struggle with the problem of how to advance his causes without marginalizing himself. Burke had five great causes, all linked by his deep aversion to the abuse of power. He defended the American colonists in their struggle for independence, the oppressed Catholics in Ireland, and the oppressed peoples of India. He predicted and condemned the bloodthirsty phase of the French Revolution, and he defended British parliamentary rule against royal encroachment.

Views are mixed regarding Burke's tactics on those fronts. Some regard him as having sacrificed too much to expediency. The judgment of Burke’s best biographer, however, is more nuanced. Conor Cruise O'Brien, himself a scholar and statesman, says that, "While Burke generally argued from deep and strong conviction, he was not above the occasional strategic adjustment if it might serve to carry the rest of his argument." Regarding how far Burke was willing to go in making such "strategic adjustments", we have Burke’s own interesting statement that, "Falsehood and delusion are allowed in no case whatever. But, as in the exercise of all the virtues, there is an economy of truth. It is a sort of temperance, by which a man speaks truth with measure that he may speak it the longer."

Burke often opined that, "Everything political depends on occasions and opportunities." Yet his conduct as the elected representative of Bristol shows that he was not willing to wait indefinitely for the perfect occasion or the ideal opportunity. In Bristol, the expedient course for him would have been to support the protectionist trade measures favored by the city's leading merchants. Instead, he offended his constituents' economic interests by advocating free trade with Ireland. Riskier still, he aroused their prejudices by working for incremental reform of the Penal Laws. By 1780, his unpopularity with his Bristol constituents was so great that he withdrew his bid for re-election. After that, his party never again considered him for high political office.

Ironically, Burke's politically costly efforts on behalf of the Irish Catholics brought him criticism from some of the very people whose lot he sought to improve. Burke detested the Penal Laws, but his considered judgment was that the best chance of dismantling them was to work for reform within the British Parliament by aligning himself with the Whigs. And it was no small accomplishment when he achieved the passage of the controversial Catholic Relief Act of 1778, the first-ever reform of the Penal Law system. It must have been disheartening to Burke, when many of his fellow Irishmen blasted him for accepting a reform that did not go far enough. He tried to explain himself to one of his critics, saying, "It is a settled rule with me, to make the most of my *actual situation*, and not to refuse to do a proper thing because there is something else more proper, which I am not able to do."

Burke's political career came to an end after a bitter dispute with his party leader over Burke's early condemnation of the French Revolution. It was only after leaving politics that he plunged himself into writing the work that would become a classic of western political philosophy, the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Let me conclude with three observations about the mystery of vocations:

First, neither Burke nor Cicero, brilliant as they were, seems to have seen deeply into his own vocation. Although both Cicero and Burke stoutly maintained that politics was the superior vocation, the truth is that both kept a foot in both camps. As one of Burke's biographers wrote, "No one that ever lived used the general idea of the thinker more successfully to judge the particular problems of the statesman. No one has ever come so close to the details of practical politics, and at the same time remembered that these can only be understood and only dealt with by the aid of the broad conceptions of political philosophy."

That encomium, of course, should have read: "No one since Cicero…." Cicero, in fact, gave a great deal of thought to the relation between politics and philosophy (by which he meant mainly ethics and political philosophy). He told his son that philosophy was "indispensable to anyone who proposes to have a good career." And he described his ideal Roman statesman as a man steeped in the city's history, who combined civilized values with "intimate knowledge of Roman institutions and traditions and the theoretical knowledge for which we are indebted to the Greeks." In other words, a man like Marcus Tullius Cicero.

In times when he was excluded from political life, Cicero plunged into philosophical studies with prodigious energy. On those occasions, he could not help casting a glance down the path not taken. In one of his dialogues, the protagonist muses, "Of what value, pray, is your human glory which can barely last for a tiny part of a single year? If you wish to look higher…you will not put yourself at the mercy of the masses' gossip nor measure your long-term destiny by the rewards you get from men. Goodness herself must draw you on by her own enticements to true glory….In no case does a person's reputation last for ever; it fades with the death of the speakers, and vanishes as posterity forgets."

Second: If judged at the time of their deaths by the results of their efforts to advance the political causes that were important to them, both Cicero and Burke were failures. The Roman Republic perished; England lost America; the French Revolution took its bloody course; the Irish Catholics and the Indians remained oppressed.

Third: It is unlikely that either Cicero or Burke could have imagined the enormous influence their philosophical writings would have in years to come. To give just one example, think of the transformative effect Cicero had on a 19-year-old pagan boy in North Africa. Here is how St. Augustine described his encounter with the man he called "a certain Cicero":

> Following the usual course of study I had already come across a book by a certain Cicero. That book of his contains an exhortation to study philosophy; it is called the *Hortensius*. This book indeed changed my whole way of feeling. It changed my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself. It gave me different plans and desires. Suddenly all vain aspirations lost their value; and I was left with an unbelievable fire in my heart, desiring the deathless qualities of wisdom. I began to rise up to return to you.

Finally, to return to the question with which I started: Is there a message in the lives of Cicero and Burke stories for our students who worry so much about whether they can, as they say, "make a difference"?

I believe the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman said it best:

> God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission—I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. …I am a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons. He has not created me for naught.

---

* Conferencia dictada en la ***Universidad de Navarra***, 22 de mayo de 2010.