



How Long is a Principle?

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PRINCIPLES, it would seem, are becoming increasingly difficult to live with, mainly because in the first place there are diverse views as to what a principle really is. Dictionary definitions are not very helpful—select what you will from the following: a fundamental truth or element; moral rule; uprightness; a general truth, that which is believed; a settled law or rule of action in human beings. There are, of course, many more.

Even if we obtained general agreement as to what a truth is, it is doubtful if we could all agree whether or not it was fundamental. Any moral rule is in an embarrassing position at the present time, while uprightness has been laughed out of court so often that it rarely dares to make a public appearance. A general truth, if we could find and decide upon one, might fit for the time being, while that which is believed, by and large, could apply to just about anything and everything. And so on.

Are there good and bad principles? Your own are good, of course. Those of other people are perhaps not so good, and some of them are definitely bad. Should there be any virtue in other people adhering to principles with which we do not agree? It may be argued that fascists who persecute minorities are men of principle when they genuinely believe that they are preserving or purifying a race, and that the Spanish Inquisitors who tortured and killed their fellow creatures to save them from eternal damnation were men of good principle. We have ample evidence that for many centuries until comparatively recently chattel slavery was regarded as good in principle, and up to a little more than a century

ago child labour was generally accepted on similar terms.

The subject deserves much closer and more detailed study, but so far at least two things emerge from our examination. The first is that a principle, whatever it be, must be a line of conduct or action that is to be maintained and held against all opposition; the second is that if we desire it to be universally accepted it must stand the acid test of whether or not those who hold it accept without reservation the holding of it by others.

Consistency is the very essence of a principle. If it is to be altered or abandoned on occasion to suit varying circumstances, for fear of loss of prestige, or for personal advancement, it thereby forfeits the name of principle.

Disraeli, it is alleged, once said, "Damn your principles—stick to the Party!" The particular circumstances in which he made this startling remark may not be known, but if he implied that the principles of the person to whom it was addressed were not those of the Conservative Party, he rightly chided a rebel in its ranks, in which case the emphasis would have been on "*your* principles." If, however, he meant that the principles of the Party must be sacrificed to save the Party, this was wrong by any standard. Moreover such conduct sows the seed of political disaster.

Many times we have seen principles go overboard in politics, and the result is that today we have three main parties with policies and principles (if they can still be flattered with the term) that overlap to such an extent that it is none too easy to distinguish one from another. Such overlapping inevitably leads to the party in power tending more and more to adopt policies long held or advocated by others.

This is fine, you may say; as long as the job is done, what does it

matter? As Cervantes said: "Much more would be done in this world if people cared not so much who got the credit for it." But there is danger, nevertheless, for when political parties lose their identity by too much of this sort of accommodation, sooner or later there is a demand for government by coalition—the first step on the road to the one-party state. Individual expression begins to atrophy.

The desire of some to be men for all seasons is evident in other aspects of public life, including the churches, where we are amazed and bewildered by the lack of agreement on matters of moral principle, and where renegades abound in all denominations. There are exceptions here, compromises there, and some vital questions are not answered at all. But digression, however tempting, must be avoided.

All this giving, taking and waffling is not only confusing to laymen, especially the young generation, who, whether it be generally believed or not, yearns for strong moral leadership, but it is positively dishonest of churchmen, politicians and others in high office to eschew long-held principles that are the main props of their faith or party, and still remain in office.

Politics will become much clearer, and the problem of choosing a government will be considerably simplified, when the parties clarify their positions by reviving the principles that have given them their name, but which they have discarded or laid aside as being unworkable or unpopular, and when one or two brave hearts in high office can be persuaded, on occasion, to adhere to vital principles, even at the cost of popularity, or of position, itself. Of such stuff are statesmen made. If it really comes to it, the response to such a challenge must be: "Damn the Party—stick to your principles!"