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978-0-521-14598-5 - The Limits of Politics: An Inaugural Lecture Given in the University of Cambridge 23 April 2008

Andrew Gamble

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THE LIMITS OF POLITICS

An Inaugural Lecture given by
Professor Andrew Gamble in the University of
Cambridge on 23 April 2008



I would like to thank everyone for coming to this Inaugural Lecture, and a special thanks to those who have travelled some distance, and in particular to Professor Tsuzuki who has come from Tokyo to be here tonight.

Groucho Marx once declared: 'Those are my principles, and if you don't like them, I have others.' This has long been regarded as a succinct summary of politics, and still more of politicians. Politics has been considered one of the most noble, most elevating and most necessary human activities, but perhaps more often as one of the most disreputable, oppressive and corrupt, something not to be talked about in polite company, and, if possible, suppressed. This is not particularly new. In the national anthem, the lines about the seditious Scots may have been carefully excised, but the second verse still confidently proclaims: 'Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks'. Politics and knavish tricks are indelibly linked in most people's minds. Politics is often regarded

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as one of the black arts, its activities cloaked in mystery. As the Queen herself is alleged to have said to her former footman, Paul Burrell: 'Paul, be careful. There are forces at work in this country of which we have no knowledge.' Asked in court what he thought the Queen had meant by that remark, Burrell replied stiffly: 'One doesn't ask the Queen what she means by something.'¹

People who study politics have at times been suspected of possessing knowledge of these dark forces. Thomas Hobbes suffered the indignity of having his books burnt in the Market Square in Cambridge after the Restoration. Fortunately not all of them. On the 400th anniversary of his birth, in 1988, I helped to organise an excursion around various places associated with Hobbes in Derbyshire. The vicar at St John the Baptist Church at Ault Hucknall where Hobbes is buried was most welcoming. He turned out to be an enthusiast for Hobbes and all things Hobbesian, but told us that when he was first appointed and tried to interest his parishioners in Hobbes, telling them what an honour it was for the Church to be associated with such a famous man, he was looked at askance. The previous incumbent had tried to deny that Hobbes was buried there (despite the existence

¹ 'What the Butler Paul Burrell Said about the Queen', *Daily Mail* 15 January 2008, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-508238.

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of a large flagstone proclaiming the fact) and had frequently delivered sermons denouncing Hobbes as the Anti-Christ.

All this would have amused Howard Warrender, my old Head of Department at Sheffield, who was a legend both for his Hobbes scholarship and for his eccentricity (on one occasion he delivered the same lecture twice in the same week to a rather astonished group of first-year students). In his Inaugural Lecture in Belfast, Howard noted that, under the Charter of the former Queen's College, a professor was required to make a declaration promising, amongst other things, that he would not 'introduce or discuss . . . any subject of politics or polemics, tending to produce contention or excitement'. When Queen's University was founded, this stipulation was dropped, thus reducing the danger, as Howard pointed out, that 'a Professor of Political Science might lecture himself out of his Chair in the act of lecturing himself in'.²

In this lecture I want to reflect on the limits of politics and some of the different ways of thinking about them. Limits signify boundaries and frontiers. They define jurisdictions, institutions and identities, the fixed and

² Howard Warrender, 'The Study of Politics', in Preston King (ed.), *The Study of Politics*, London: Cass, 1977, p. 181.

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seemingly permanent determinants of our world. A limit is also a boundary beyond which something ceases to be possible or allowable, and as such is always contestable by human action. It places constraints on action, but these constraints can be challenged and frequently are. We speak of the limit of our power, the limit of our authority, the limit of our interest, the limit of our ambition. There is often a tension between what is possible and what is allowed. Something may be possible but not allowed, or allowed but not possible. Testing limits and wanting to go beyond them is a characteristic human desire, just as overreaching ourselves is a characteristic human failing. A great deal of politics is debate about what the limits of politics are, how they are determined and whether those limits can and should be altered through politics. To call something limited implies that it is restricted and inadequate, and should be overcome. But to many critics of contemporary politics, it is our failure to respect either natural or social or epistemic limits which is the cause of our present problems.

The limits of politics at Cambridge

I want to begin these reflections with Cambridge. It is hardly a secret that the study of politics has been limited

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in Cambridge, and that these limits are a result of what has been allowable rather than what has been possible. The discipline has been fragmented between Faculties and submerged in other areas. It was not until 2004 that the University created a Department of Politics, and shortly after established the Chair to which I have been elected. There has been a marked contrast with Oxford in this respect, which, together with the LSE, pioneered the development of the discipline in Britain. Oxford currently has a combined Department of Politics and International Relations with more than 100 active research staff, and 10 research centres and institutes.

The reasons for the relative neglect of Politics at Cambridge are complex. There is after all an old tradition of Political Science at Cambridge, represented by Henry Sidgwick and John Seeley.³ Political Science for them was a broad multidisciplinary enquiry, drawing on law, philosophy, history and economics. They wanted to knit together all the different insights of thinking about the problems of government and provide an education suitable for those who would serve the Empire in a variety of capacities. Seeley, the historian of British imperial expansion, believed in building Political Science through the

³ Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: a study in nineteenth-century intellectual history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

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empirical study of politics and history, collecting together a mass of facts and developing theory inductively from them. Sidgwick was the successor to Mill as the main exponent of the utilitarian tradition, and wanted Political Science to become the heart of the Moral Sciences Tripos. He was a rather severe figure, severe in particular on himself. He once confided to his journal: 'Pascal was right, If one is to embrace infinite doubt . . . it ought to be upon sackcloth and ashes and in a bare cell and not amid '47 Port and the silvery talk of W. G. Clark. When I go to my rooms, I feel strange, ghastly . . .'; and in another passage: 'I always feel it only requires an effort, a stretching of the muscles, and the tasteless luxury, the dusty culture, the noisy, inane polemics of Oxford and Cambridge are left behind for ever.'⁴

Political Science at Cambridge had its critics. When the Master of Trinity Hall referred disparagingly to trivia in popular newspapers, such as calculations of the number of pocket-handkerchiefs which would stretch diagonally from the earth to the moon, F. W. Maitland, formerly one of Sidgwick's students, replied: 'That is what we call

⁴ David James, *Henry Sidgwick: science and faith in Victorian England*, Riddell Memorial Lectures, 39th series, Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1970, p. 14.

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Political Science here.⁵ After Sidgwick's death in 1900, Alfred Marshall succeeded in establishing Economics as a separate Tripos, and the empire of Political Science came to be divided between History and Economics. Economics took Politics into the title of its Faculty (it only removed it in 2004), while History retained some Political Science papers in their Tripos. At Oxford a very different path of development opened up. The endowing of the Gladstone Chair in 1912 was followed in the 1920s by the establishment of Modern Greats, the combination of Politics, Philosophy and Economics which grew in strength and led to a gradual increase in the number of college appointments in Politics, and the foundation of the great strength of Oxford in the discipline today.

Cambridge lacked the funds to establish a Professorship in Political Science, but in 1928 it received an offer from the Laura Rockefeller Memorial Fund in New York to endow two Chairs, one in Sociology and one in Political Science, to help the establishment of social science at Cambridge. The University declined the Chair in Sociology, but accepted the Chair in Political Science, acknowledging that it would 'give the subject a status and influence such as it has in most other important

⁵ Collini, Winch and Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics*, p. 349.

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Universities but still lacks in Cambridge'. Although the University accepted in correspondence with the Memorial Fund that the purpose of the endowment was to develop 'research work and instruction in the social sciences',⁶ it arranged that the new Chair would 'be primarily held for the time being in the Faculty of History'. The Chairholder was expected to study the constitutions of the world and for this purpose was allowed to be away from Cambridge one term in every three.⁷

The first holder of that Chair of Political Science was Ernest Barker, a historian of political thought trained in Oxford, who renamed the two surviving Political Science papers in the History Tripos – Political Science A and Political Science B – 'The History of Political Thought' and 'Theories of the Modern State' respectively. He also brought forward proposals for a Tripos in Social and Political Studies. These got nowhere. According to one account, Barker was quickly 'drawn into the Byzantine network of already established committees and degree structures, and whatever expectations of radical change might have been envisaged by electors and

⁶ Laura Spellman Rockefeller Fund, Rockefeller Archive Center, Folder 521, Box 20.

⁷ The wider plans which were discussed between the University and the Memorial Fund at that time were not realised. They are set out in the papers collected in the Rockefeller Archive Center, New York, Folder 521, Box 20.

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candidates alike were quickly neutralised in the labyrinth of long-settled practices'.⁸

Barker did, however, help to consolidate the study of political thought at Cambridge, which grew into a major strength, and for which Cambridge scholarship and Cambridge teaching has become renowned. Kingsley Smellie, later a Professor of Political Science at the LSE, once reminisced: 'Sitting by the side of the sluggish but lovely river Cam, we discussed rival theories of the state.'⁹ What was lost almost entirely was the empirical and analytical tradition of Cambridge Political Science. This had no champions, and some formidable opponents. The young Michael Oakeshott, aged twenty-five, in an essay on political science in Cambridge, argued strongly for a rejection of any attempt to apply scientific methods to the study of politics.¹⁰

The dismemberment of Political Science by History and Economics meant that there were never the same developments in the curriculum or the staffing of the

⁸ Robert Wokler, 'The Professoriate of Political Thought in England since 1914: a tale of three chairs', in D. Castiglione and I. Hampsher-Monk (eds.), *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 149.

⁹ Kingsley Martin, *Father Figures: a first volume of autobiography 1897-1931*, London: Hutchinson, 1966, p. 116.

¹⁰ Michael Oakeshott, 'The Cambridge School of Political Science', in *What is History? and Other Essays*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004, pp. 45-66.

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subject that occurred at Oxford and the LSE – and, after 1945, in a growing number of other universities. Politics and some of the other social sciences could be studied at Cambridge only as part of other degree schemes. When I read Economics, I took papers in British and US political institutions, the British industrial revolution, political sociology, sociological theory, Russian economic development, as well as macro and micro economics. Such a combination of subjects would be impossible today. The creation of the Social and Political Sciences (SPS) Committee in 1970 was an important step forward for the social sciences at Cambridge at the time, but it was hedged around with restrictions. Later it evolved into a single-department Faculty, but the disciplines within it remained very small in comparison with those elsewhere. International Relations gained a foothold in Cambridge with the creation of the Centre of International Studies. The Centre has flourished in the last ten years, but always remained separate from SPS and from Politics.

Yet, despite this fragmentation, the conception of Political Science as a broad all-encompassing field also lived on in Cambridge, in the form of the contribution of particular individuals to the study of politics, even if few, if any, would have called themselves political scientists. There have been some rich veins of work, including the history of political thought, associated with Dunn,