"A Curious Mixture of Geniality and Venom"

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In the fall of 1845, Sir Robert Peel, Prime Minister of England and leader of the Conservative Party, introduced a bill in Parliament for repeal of what were called at that time the Corn laws but what today we would describe simply as tariffs on the importation of ordinary food grains. Peel's policy created a deep rift within his own party where the landed aristocracy viewed retention of the Corn laws as vital to the preservation of British agriculture.

Now the highly vocal and aggressive leader of Peel's critics was none other than Benjamin D'Israeli, later to become Prime Minister but at that time a relatively unknown back-bencher in the conservative party. D'Israeli was then 41. He had come to Parliament over a very rocky road indeed. After failed careers in the law, as a speculator in mining stocks and as a newspaper publisher, D'Israeli entered politics with little more than a reputation as a society fop who had a couple of moderately successful novels to his credit. After four unsuccessful tries, he was finally elected in 1837. He had commenced his political endeavors associated with a loosely organized group known as the radicals but soon found himself drawn to the ranks of the conservatives. Thenceforth, D'Israeli seems to have been convinced of the absolute and overriding importance of party organization and party principles.

Thus early on in a long series of debates, D'Israeli noted that Peel was now adopting the views of the opposition Whigs.

D'Israeli remarked, "While we are admiring the principles of relaxed commerce, there is extreme danger of our admitting the principles of

relaxed politics. I advise, therefore, that we all - whatever may be our opinions about free trade - oppose the introduction of free politics. Let men stand by the principles by which they rise, right or wrong. Do not, then, because you see a great personage giving up his opinions - do not cheer him on, do not give him so ready a reward for political tergiversation."

When Peel responded in some anger to these sallies by a disdained and unimportant member of his own party, D'Israeli, urged his fellow conservatives not to take his criticism of Peel as intended in a hostile manner but rather as friendly advice. To this Peel, no mean Parliamentary duelist himself, retorted with the following comment and bit of verse:

> "The honorable gentleman has a perfect right to support a hostile motion but please let him not say he does it in a friendly spirit, rather:
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> 'Give me the avowed, the erect, the manly foe,
> Bold I can meet - perhaps may turn his blow!
> But of all plagues, good heaven, thy wrath can send
> Save me, oh save me, from the candid friend.'"

The impact of D'Israeli's relentless assault was more far reaching than might have been expected. Peel secured repeal of the Corn laws but only through the help of the Whigs. The deep divisions within the conservatives resulted in Peel's being thrown out of office by those members of his own party who felt he had betrayed them. He was never again to hold high office and devoted himself thenceforth to supporting various Whigs who shared his views. As he departed, perhaps he may have had ringing in his ears some of D'Israeli's farewell epithets: "a burglar of other's

intellects," D'Israeli called him, "there is no other statesman who has committed larceny on such a grand scale. The right honorable gentleman is reminiscent of a poker except that the latter sometimes gives off occasional signs of warmth. The right honorable gentleman's smile resembles nothing more than the silver fittings on a coffin." As these debates brought about the setting of Peel's star so they marked the beginning also of D'Israeli's rise to fame. He became almost at once the actual leader of the conservatives though he was not to become their titular head for several years more.

As a forum for witty exchanges the British Parliament came into its own about the middle of the 18th century with such speakers as Charles Fox, William Pitt, John Wilkes and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Most frequently the sharp rhetoric of these gentlemen was brought to play in brief jabs at the intellectual, political or social qualifications of their opponents. When the Earl of Sandwich told John Wilkes that he was doomed to die either on the gallows or of venereal disease, Wilkes shot back: "It all depends, sir, on whether I embrace your principles or your mistress."

Richard Sheridan, playwright, producer, theater owner, was the son of a proud but poor Irish actor and the author of two of the best known and most frequently produced comedies in English, "The Rivals" and the "School for Scandal." Sheridan sought and won a seat in Parliament as a means of achieving the acceptable social status which he felt was denied one who merely earned his living in the theatre. In Parliament he catered to the prevailing taste for heavily sarcastic parody in his comment on a frustratingly complex tax bill, which, Sheridan said reminded him of "The House that Jack Built": "First comes the act imposing the tax, next comes an act to amend the act for imposing the tax; and then comes an act to

remedy the defects of the act for explaining the act that amended the act; and so on ad infinium. This tax bill is like a ship built in a dock-yard, which put to sea on the first voyage before it was discovered they had forgotten the rudder: after every voyage, it revealed some new defect that had to be remedied. Finally, the vessel was obliged to be broken up and rebuilt entirely." Regarding his use of such devices in the House of Commons, Sheridan admitted that he laid his plans well in advance, noting, "I found that four-fifths of the House were composed of country squires and great fools; my first effort, therefore, was by a lively sally or an ironical remark to make them laugh; that laugh effaced the recollection of what had been urged in opposition to my view of the subject. Then I whipped in my argument and had the way clear before me."

No British politician carried on more vigorously the battle for social reform than did David Lloyd George of the Liberal Party who was Prime Minister in the latter half of World War I. Few British politicians have carried the style of gloves-off political invective to more ruthless extremes. Born a Welshman and in poverty, Lloyd George maintained a bitter and lifelong animosity toward the British aristocracy. Alluding to a public meeting at which Joseph Chamberlain, leader of the Conservatives had spoken, "Mr. Chamberlain has appealed to the workmen, and there were some very fine specimens of the British workmen on his platform last week. There were three dukes, two marquises, three or four earls. They were present to help the workman to tax his own bread. The Corn laws meant high rents for them, and when a statesman of Mr. Chamberlain's position proposes a return of the Corn laws, then lords, dukes, earls and squires come clucking toward him like a flock of fowl when they hear the corn shake in the feed pail."

Similar ferocity was brought to bear on any Liberal who might have the temerity to cross the floor of the House and join the Conservatives. Sir John Simon, was such a one, and of him Lloyd George remarked: "The right honorable gentleman has sat for so long on the fence that the iron has entered into his soul. Now, Mr. Speaker, there have been many honorable and right honorable gentlemen greater than the right honorable gentleman who have crossed the floor for reasons of honest conviction but never has a right honorable gentleman crossed it before and left behind him such a slimy trail." The resentment frequently stirred by Lloyd George's style impelled Margot Asquith to remark, "Lloyd George can never see a belt without hitting below it."

If the Peel-D'Israeli exchanges were a struggle between two skillful contestants then indeed debates between Winston Churchill and Aneurin Bevan take on the aura of a battle between titans.

In May, 1940 when the war was going badly, Churchill formed a coalition or national government in which conservatives, labor and liberals were all supposed to work together for the war effort. Clement Attlee, Leader of Labor, was taken in as deputy prime minister. Churchill and many others felt that, accordingly, war-time was no time for criticism when the country faced such herculean tasks. A few felt differently; particularly Bevan. He explained his viewpoint saying: "In a democracy, idolatry is the first sin. Not even the supreme emergency of war justifies the abandonment of critical judgment. To surrender all to one man is to risk being destroyed by him."

The differences between them were exacerbated by the difference in class so often found to excite personal animosities in Britian. Bevan was born one of eleven children of a Welsh coal miner and went to work in a butcher

shop at the age of 11. Bevan was exceptional in that he, like D'Israeli and Lloyd George, came to political prominence without following the usual Eton-Harrow-Oxbridge route. There could hardly have been greater social contract between Bevan's background and that of Churchill, born at Blenheim palace and descended from John Churchill, first Duke of Marlboro.

Bevan was in the forefront of those who attacked Churchill's pre-occupation with the campaigns in North Africa and Italy and the constant postponement of the proposed attack across the English Channel. Said Bevan, "the whole of this country wants to know what strategic conception put the British and American armies to fight their way up the length of the Peninsula in the autumn and winter. Is that the soft underbelly of the Axis? It is nonsense. In fact, we are climbing up the prickly backbone." Churchill called him "A Merchant of Discourtesy, a Minister of Disease and in need of psychiatric treatment."

There were occasions, of course, when Bevan talked a good deal of sense and when, under his stimulus, government mistakes were corrected. But the bitter often sharply rude nature of his remarks tended to discredit the worth of his arguments. In remarks directed once at a conservative lady minister of education, Bevan said, "I do not know what the right honorable lady, the Minister of Education, is grinning at. I was told by one of my friends this afternoon, that this is the face that sank a thousand scholarships."

In the post-war years Churchill and Bevan continued to display their sharp wit and mutual antagonism on the floor of the Commons. Churchill announced his unhappy conviction that "the right honorable member will remain as squalid a nuisance in peacetime as he was in war." But in many instances Churchill preferred to attack parties and policies rather than individuals. Sometime after the Laborites were voted into power, Churchill declared

socialism to be "the philosophy of failure, the creed of ignorance and the gospel of envy." He referred to the laborites as a "government of the duds, by the duds and for the duds" and that it would shortly vanish "unwept, unhonored, unsung, and unhung."

Political wit in Britain has often been demonstrated on the hustings or to a limited degree today on T.V. But over the centuries, the floor of the Commons has provided the principal national forum for demonstrations of skill in political repartee. As many of the quotations foregoing reveal, wit turned out often to be as much sarcasm, ridicule, personal invective and character destruction as it did pure humor. In other words, wit is generally a weapon of attack engaged in specifically as a means of assailing the opposition. Occasionally, but not often, Churchillian sallies were self-deprecatory as when he informed a French audience that he was going to speak French to them - "a formidable undertaking," he said, "and one that will put great demands on your friendship for Britain." But in general the simple attainment of humorous effect was not the principal objective.

In our own country political wit has taken a different shape. We have had many fine political orators in our national history but less of the kind of parry and thrust found in Britain. For one thing the size and procedures of the two houses of Congress do not provide nearly as appropriate a setting as does the House of Commons. The chamber of the House at Westminister provides seats for only two-thirds of the commons' 630 members. Thus for business of any importance at all a good sized audience at fairly close quarters is almost always assured. The question hour, moreover, allows members of the opposition to get at the party in power with rhetoric and wit which can often be made to substitute for logic.

But in Congress where speeches are drafted for distribution back home and may simply be included in the record without ever being read, there is less opportunity and less audience for spontaneous exchanges.

Thus political wit in this country has been formed to a greater degree in the campaign or other public appearances of our political figures. In addition there is a whole collection of political humor which might be catagorized as personal legend. There are stories, fables; parables or off-hand quotations attributed to leading political personalities.

Such, of course, is the enormous volume of wit ascribed to Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln joke books grew up in his time though Lincoln himself claimed he knew only 100 jokes and that none of them were original. His famous stories earned him both popularity and criticism. He used them for everything from campaigning to relieving his own acute frustrations and anxieties caused by the weighty burdens of office which he felt so gravely.

A good sample of Lincoln, the humorist campaigning, came in one of his early tries for office. He was debating with one George Forquer who had changed from the Whigs, Lincoln's party, to join the Democrats. This switch brought him a $3,000 a year Democratic appointment. Forquer built himself a house and had a lightning rod attached, very much of a novelty in the neighborhood at that time. Lincoln said he himself would like to achieve something in life, but that he would rather die now than live to see the day when he might change his party affiliation for $3,000 a year and then feel compelled to erect a lightning rod to protect a guilty conscience from a wrathful God.

But Lincoln was capable too of the short, sharp jab aimed at persons or problems that irritated him. There are numerous stories of Lincoln expressing exasperation (or in some cases approval) for various of his generals.

General Hooker's lack of activity frustrated Lincoln. But to impress the President, Hooker sent him a message headed: Headquarters: in the Saddle. "The trouble with Hooker," Lincoln commented, "is that his headquarters is where his hindquarters ought to be."

But Lincoln's more frequent indulgence in storytelling led him to be called the American Aesop and established a variety of American humor which has continued down to the present. Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina, for example, was famous for his fund of illustrative anecdotes. Some politicians have cultivated a kind of grass-roots, backwoods style, much of it, of course, unprintable but with a flavor unmistakably American. Earl Long, Governor of Louisiana and redoubtable brother of the infamous Huey, not surprisingly, found many of his constituents reacted positively to homespun jokes at the expense of the rich. One of his favorites was about a rich man who was so tight "he squeaked when he walked. Anyway he died and stood before St. Peter and the Devil who was preparing to take him away. Wait a minute, the rich man said, I done some good things on earth. Once on a cold day 16 years ago I gave a blind man a nickel. Yes, and five years before that I gave ten cents to a poor widow woman who had no carfare. And - wait - eight years before that I gave ten cents to the Red Cross. Well, so what shall we do with him, asked the Devil? On, said St. Peter, give him back his two bits and tell him to go to hell."

The after dinner speech, a feature of the arduous and endless fund-raising in which our politicians must engage, continues as a standard instrument for presentation of American political rhetoric. An exchange years ago between two public figures, Senator Chauncy Depew of New York, and Ambassador Joseph Choate, may well have summed up what many have come to feel about this standard form of political expression. Once Depew introduced Choate as America's most

inveterate after dinner speaker: "All you need to do to get some remarks out of Mr. Choate," Depew said, "is to open his mouth, drop in a dinner, and up comes a speech." On his feet, Choate replied, "Mr. Depew says that if you open my mouth and drop in a dinner up will come a speech. But I warn you that if you open your mouths and drop in one of Mr. Depew's speeches, up will come your dinners."

Two of the most eminent practitioners of humor in American public life have been, of course, John F. Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson. Their careers can be cited to prove diametrically opposing conclusions as to the value of wit as an effective political tool. Stevenson's advisors were often acutely doubtful as to the effectiveness of their candidate's witticisms in strengthening his appeal to the voters. His sometimes rather intricate jokes were thought to confuse the voters as different ideas followed each other in a relatively short space. For example, on the campaign trail in Illinois he noted once that "They say I am a captive of the city bosses, then of the AFL-CIO, then of the Dixiecrats, then of Wall Street and most recently, I am supposed to be under the spell of the organization called the ADA. Next week I'll probably read that I have a new sweetheart, a girl called Ada. I have not met her yet. I had no idea I was so popular and I hope I can bear this multiple courtship and captivity with becoming modesty." But Stevenson defended his use of humor. It was, he felt, consistent with our tradition and our national character. He saw humor and particularly ridicule as effective in countering one's opponents and in focusing the audience's attention on an issue.

Stevenson was always ready to kid himself which he frequently did. Commenting on what he might do after his defeat in the 1952 election he noted that he had had different kinds of advice from differing groups.

One group urged him to become the scourge of the Republican Party. "And finally," he said, "there is the much smaller group that feels it is not wholly unworthy or improper for me to earn a living. My sons are numbered in the latter group."

Barry Goldwater, no mean humorist himself, has recorded that on arrival in the Senate, Kennedy was quite a serious young man. Noticing this somber outlook, some of the older and more experienced Senators on the Labor Committee ganged up to tease him a bit and, as Goldwater put it, "before we knew it Jack was up and wanted to fight."

But when one reads of his life and times and particularly when we see him again in action as we did in the recent TV recapitulations of Kennedy's public life, one cannot but feel his running sense of enjoyment at what he was doing. His humor had a graceful ironic turn, the gentle riducule that delighted his audience. He became gradually irrepressible. In time, audiences came to expect a few clever cracks in any public appearance as they would from a Danny Kaye or a Bob Hope. The speaker's youthful good looks and persistent half smile reflecting perfect self-confidence assured him of the warmest audience response. Yet even today his witticisms read almost as well as they sounded when first uttered.

Kennedy, like Stevenson, joked at his own expense and more frequently. Quite startling, however, was Kennedy's willingness not only to ridicule himself but to parody even some of his most serious and profound appeals to the nation. Thus, in front of a money raising conclave of Democrats held a year or so after his inauguration, Kennedy appealed for funds in familiar cadences: "We observe tonight, not a celebration of freedom, but a victory of party, for we have sworn to pay off the same party debt our forebears ran up nearly a year and three months ago. Our deficit will not be paid off in

the next hundred days, nor will it be paid off in the first thousand days, nor in the life of this administration. Nor - perhaps in the lifetime on this planet. But let us begin - remembering that generosity is not a sign of weakness and that Ambassadors are always subject to Senate confirmation."

Kennedy used humor marvellously also to disarm his critics. In 1958 when it was well-known that he would make a bid for the Presidency he told the Gridiron Club, "I just received the following wire from my generous daddy: Dear Jack - Don't buy a single vote more than necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide." Similarly he said he didn't see what was wrong with giving his brother, Bob, a little specialized experience in the Justice Department before Bobby started his law practice.

The N. Y. Times columnist, Tom Wicker, declared he found the most fitting epitaph for Kennedy, to be a short bit of verse on a beer mug the President gave his good friend, Dave Powers:

"There are three things which are real
God, human folly and laughter
The first two are beyond comprehension
So we must do what we can with the third."