Bernard Crick
In Defence of Politics
Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1962;
(Fifth Edition), Continuum 2000)

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When *In Defence of Politics* was first published in 1962 Edward Shils praised its sobriety, liberal spirit, and toughness of mind, while Isaiah Berlin called it "an exceedingly clever and disturbing book on important issues. All that he writes is alive and much of what he says, even when it seems perversely provocative, turns out to be penetrating and serious."[1] Berlin's review appeared in *Twentieth Century* under the title 'Why are these books neglected?' The other two books reviewed were Norman Cohn's *In Pursuit of the Millennium* and George Lichtheim's *Marxism.* Berlin's point was that all these books had been largely dismissed in reviews and ignored. *In Defence of Politics* had drawn a particularly hostile review from Richard Crossman. There were many things Berlin disliked in the book, but these were outweighed for him by its positive qualities, in particular its boldness and freshness. "We are surely not so rich in original writers on politics that we can ignore so much ability and passion well expressed…I should like to salute Mr.Crick, a serious and very gifted writer with something of his own to say."[2]

Since *In Defence of Politics* first appeared sixty years ago it has gone through five editions and is still in print. Crick notes how pleased he was that chapter 1 and chapter 7 were copied illegally and distributed in pirate editions in the Soviet Union and in Pinochet's Chile. Berlin was right in seeing that Crick's essay was unusual for its time and had an originality and vigour which was rare in contemporary political writing. One of the reasons for this was that Crick defined politics in a way which was unfamiliar particularly for a British readership. He advances a republican conception of politics, drawing on Aristotle and on a clutch of later writers, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Madison, Hamilton, Tocqueville and Mill. There are few contemporary authors he cites – Hannah Arendt, George Orwell and Thomas Mann are the exceptions. His interpretation of Aristotle as Berlin noted is similar to that of Sheldon Wolin in *Politics and Vision.*[3] Politics for Crick is a great and civilising activity, whose aim is order, and whose benefits include both freedom and harmony. Crick argues that for Aristotle politics meant the activity of governing the polis through negotiation and compromise, avoiding extremes and violence and the pursuit of absolute ideals. He quotes Aristotle's criticism of Plato: "there is a point at which a polis by advancing in unity will cease to be a polis" (p.17). The polis is an aggregate of many members with different interests and different beliefs. Politics writes Crick is "the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community" (p. 21).

Republicanism had been an important strand in western political thought, but was overshadowed in the twentieth century by different variants of democratic theory. Crick drew on elements of the civic republican tradition as represented in the *Federalist Papers* and other early modern authors. He welcomed the revival of interest in the pre-democratic republican tradition spearheaded by Quentin Skinner, John Pocock and

[1] Isaiah Berlin, 'Why Are These Books Neglected?', *Twentieth Century* 172 no. 1019 (Autumn 1963), 146.
[2] Berlin, 'Why Are These Books Neglected?', p. 146.
[3] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* Boston: Little, Brown 1960.

Philip Pettit among others. In a book review of Skinner's *Liberty before Liberalism*[4] he appreciates its focus on the neo-Roman theory of free citizens and free states in early modern Britain with its "good commonwealth men", such as Nedham, Harrington, and Milton. But he regrets that Skinner appears to assume that the republican tradition is now dead. Crick argues that though it might be much diminished it had not entirely faded away, and he mentions a few examples in both theory and practice, including *In Defence of Politics* itself, which he now associates firmly with the republican tradition Skinner had so meticulously explored.

Crick believed strongly that politics in the civic republican tradition was the only way of holding a free and complex society together, and sought to dispel illusions as to what politics involved. Since a conflict of interests is inevitable in any state, the processes and institutions of politics are required in order to find out what those interests are, and to show citizens the impossibility of all interests being satisfied simultaneously, and therefore the necessity of negotiation and compromise if social order, pluralism, diversity and freedom are to be first achieved and then sustained. It is impossible to determine what the public interest is without trying to find out what it is that people want, taking people as they are not as the political theorist might like them to be, and discovering how the different things that they want can be reconciled. Only politics can do this. This means that politics will often be scorned by many on left, right and centre because it is messy, unprincipled, approximate, unscientific and uncertain and because politicians so often appear devious, evasive, opportunistic and untrustworthy. They never measure up to expectations. Crick's hard point is that they never will, and in expecting them to do so, we find ourselves perpetually disillusioned by politics and by politicians, which is why so many then disengage from politics altogether, seeking comfort elsewhere.

In Crick's view politics has constantly to be defended against many threats and dangers. They include ideology, democracy, nationalism, technology and false friends. Each has a chapter devoted to it, and it is here that the age of the book is most apparent. It was written at the height of the cold war and many of its intellectual preoccupations reflect that. In the chapter on ideology, for example, Crick adopts a very narrow definition of ideology, which restricts it to the totalitarian systems of Nazism and Communism. All other forms of ideas in politics, including even nationalism, are treated not as ideologies but as doctrines. The difference between an ideology and a doctrine for Crick is that an ideology is by definition anti-political. It seeks to impose an artificial unity on a diverse society by claiming a single source of truth and authority. Doctrines are not anti-political in this sense, so long as they tolerate other doctrines and do not advocate the suppression of contrary views. Even so Crick is at pains to attack both the beliefs and behaviour of what he calls non-political conservatives (Michael Oakeshott was his main target here), a-political liberals, and anti-political socialists. But the dividing line between political and anti-political is a hard one to draw with any precision. In reflecting on *In Defence of Politics* Crick acknowledged he had second thoughts about some of his arguments. In particular he felt he had underestimated the importance of both Conservatism and Marxism and had failed to recognise that some form of free market was necessary for political rule (pp. 263-4).

[4] Bernard Crick, 'Liberty before Liberalism', *Political Quarterly* 69:3, July September 1998, reprinted in Stephen Ball (ed), *Defending Politics: Bernard Crick at the Political Quarterly* London: Wiley-Blackwell 2015, pp. 445-7.

One of the striking features of the book is that Crick defends politics against democracy. This was one reason for the many hostile reviews. Crick's scepticism about democracy may seem surprising since the political label he was happiest with was 'democratic socialist'. The scepticism and hostility of many liberals and conservatives to democracy was well-established, but it was unusual for a progressive like Crick in the second half of the twentieth century to be so critical. Crick argues that whether democracy is good or bad for political rule depends on the context. It can both strengthen liberties and curtail them. The big danger democracy poses to political rule is that too often it leads to centralisation and autocracy. Using the doctrine of popular sovereignty and the will of the majority it sweeps away all checks and balances. A typical institutional device to realise popular sovereignty is the referendum. Crick was strongly opposed to referendums and to any unmediated exercise of democratic power. The doctrine of the sovereignty of the people he considered fundamentally anti-political because it implied unity where there was none. He considered the doctrine of sovereignty and the general will as used by Hobbes and Rousseau to be anti-political doctrines. Sovereignty was only appropriate in an emergency for the republic when the absolute power of final decision was needed. The problem with the Hobbesian view of politics according to Crick was that there was always an emergency, so the absolute powers could never be laid aside.

Crick insists that political rule and liberty preceded democracy. They did not have to wait before it was achieved. Britain was not a democracy in 1913 but still enjoyed political rule and liberty. He did not deny that political rule and democracy could be combined, but only if the 'winner-takes-all' mentality of majoritarian democracy was abandoned. Democracy was an essential element in Aristotle's mixed constitution but not the only element. Aristocracy and monarchy were needed too. If democracy was not checked its politicians would become first demagogues and then despots. What was required instead were popular representatives who understood the nature of political rule and were therefore prepared to act as politicians, able to mediate, compromise, and think about the larger purposes of government and the interests of the whole community. Only if representatives become politicians can the Republic survive. For Crick the key question was not whether a country was a democracy but whether it was governed politically, which meant promoting tolerance, compromise and respect for the different interests which made up the political community. Liberty for him was an achievement of politics not a precondition for politics. These were not ideas readily understood in the 1960s when the dividing lines between democracy and totalitarianism were so sharply drawn. Crick insisted that totalitarianism was perfectly compatible with democracy, and that it was a mistake to think that totalitarian regimes did not enjoy consent and could not use doctrines of popular sovereignty and nationalism to uphold their legitimacy.

Crick has his own sharp dividing lines. He distinguishes between three styles of rule – tyrannical or autocratic rule, political or republican rule and totalitarian rule. Tyrannical rule has been the norm for most of the last two thousand years. Totalitarian rule was a new arrival in the twentieth century. Political rule, according to Crick, has only existed in complex and advanced societies, and its specific origins only found in European experience. His Eurocentrism is very marked, and whether fifth century Athens really was a complex and advanced society he does not pause to ask. In the epilogue, written much later, he acknowledges some of the deficiencies of the Athenian model, including the subjugation of women and the holding of slaves. But he still insists on the debt we

owe the Athenians for creating a unique and wonderful form of civilisation "the polis itself, the citizen republic, government by free citizens in public debate" (p. 275). Crick never gave up hope in the possibility of re-creating the citizen republic in a modern form.

The belief in politics as practice, citizen engagement, rule by discussion not violence, and respect for different interests and beliefs were lodestars which stayed with Crick throughout his life. *In Defence of Politics* is a bold first sketch of the position which he never abandoned. It is provocative and challenging without being wholly convincing, because there is not much substance. There are few historical examples or consideration of hard cases. Political rule is constantly invoked as the best way of governing complex societies without much analysis of situations where political rule has been relatively easy and others where it has been desperately difficult. Crick acknowledges this in some of the long footnotes he attached to later editions. First came his 'Footnote to rally the academic professors of politics' added in 1964. He used it to attack many of the established figures in his field as well as providing more academic sources and detailed argument for his position. There followed 'Footnote to rally fellow socialists', composed in 1982. It reflected on what seemed terminal divisions in the British Labour Party at the time. Finally in 1992 he wrote 'Footnote to rally those who grudge the price'. It reflected on the changed political landscape after the end of the cold war and the new political problems of a world which for the moment appeared to have escaped the clutches of totalitarianism. In 2000 for the fifth edition he also wrote a rather bleak *Epilogue*. It surveyed the multiple challenges facing political communities in the new millennium.

Crick had not been idle in the intervening years, and this is reflected in the *Footnotes*, and in the *Introduction* and *Epilogue* to the fifth edition. He recalls giving *In Defence of Politics* to some miners to read in an extra-mural class in the 1960s. He reports one of them saying to him "Ay, I gets all that; but does thee not believe in anything, Professor lad?" (p.9). In his subsequent writings and activities in the decades that followed Crick showed that there were things he believed in and cared passionately about. He spent a lot of time, for example, thinking about what politics could contribute to improve the situation in deeply divided societies such as Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Israel-Palestine. He accepted that these represented some of the most acute challenges to his argument. Political rule in Britain or the United States at that time posed few difficulties by comparison. Crick studied divided societies deeply and had many interesting insights and recommendations. For Northern Ireland he always insisted that no progress would be possible unless practical institutional ways could be found to allow Northern Ireland to face both ways – towards Ireland and towards Britain. Doctrines of majoritarian democracy and winner takes all had to be disabled, and a slow process of negotiation, compromise, and mutual tolerance initiated.

Crick was immensely heartened when the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet empire collapsed. He saluted the courage of those who had stood against tyranny and created a civic republican movement of resistance. At the same time he reflects ruefully that his efforts to persuade the activists who had defied and overthrown their communist regimes that they should now build the institutions for political rule and civic engagement were largely in vain. Their response was to quote large chunks of Hayek at him. Replacing one ideology with another was not Crick's idea of how to move on from Communism. But he found few supporters for his kind of democratic socialism

or any understanding of the conditions for political rule. He sensed the disillusion that was bound to follow. All revolutions are failures, he wrote, but they are not the same failure (p. 271). Replacing All-State with All-Market he later wrote was never going to be a recipe for success (p. 281).

Crick was always sceptical about the promise of democracy because he thought that government would only occasionally be conducted by individuals of high principle who act in the public interest and for the public good. Abraham Lincolns are extremely rare, and even Lincoln made mistakes. The frustrations of managing the conflict of interests arising from a diverse society has always led some politicians and some political thinkers to dream of how they can escape the limits governing politically places on them, by imposing their conception of the public good and suppressing the opposition to it.

Crick was entirely opposed to this, and to the populism which has always been an integral part of democracy. He noted how Napoleon had declared that the politics of the future will be the art of stirring the masses (p. 179). Crick saw this as an ever-present danger. The political leaders who most attract his ire are those like General de Gaulle and Fidel Castro who proclaim themselves as the embodiment of the Nation or the Revolution and dispense with the need to unify a diverse society through political means. Following Max Weber he saw great dangers in leaders who pursued an ethic of ultimate ends and abandoned an ethic of responsibility. Already in the 1960s he was warning of the trivialisation and dumbing down of citizens by modern media. Orwell makes several appearances in these pages, anticipating Crick's later acceptance of the request from Sonia Orwell to write a biography of him. The depiction in *1984* of the depoliticised cultural debasement in which the proles are kept was interpreted by Crick as a Swiftian satire on the British popular press. Since then the power of the media has greatly increased, while that of the structures of democratic participation have sharply diminished. In Crick's view the institutions, habits and behaviour which can preserve an open, inclusive and pluralist system of political rule have continually to be fought for. They can so easily be lost.

One of Crick's greatest passions later in his life was his passion for active citizenship as an antidote to Orwell's 'empty mob' and 'hate-filled mob' to which so much of modern media and populist politicians sought to reduce citizens. His forebodings were already present in the 1960s. He wrote for example that one of the most dangerous tendencies in modern democracies was "the willingness of many followers…to treat their leaders as if they were God, the declarer of the law, the one above criticism, above the need to consult, the only truly self-sufficient man" (p.23). Crick campaigned for citizenship to be included in the national curriculum in Britain to help spread understanding of the conditions for political rule. The strengthening of democracy through the creation of a citizen culture rather than a subject culture, and the encouragement of citizens to be active, to argue, to discuss, above all to participate in whatever political forms are available to express their interests and their hopes, this for Crick is the process of political education itself, which is never-ending. His idea of political education was not to confine it to the teaching of the nuts and bolts of how government works, but to encourage students to become active political participants.

Crick always believed that politics was an activity not a set of fixed principles. He was scornful of the politics professors who studied politics but rarely had any direct

experience of it or engagement in it. His very first book *The American Science of Politics* had contested the idea that politics could ever be a science. He maintained that the study of politics is always a part of politics (p. 8), and that there was no knowledge available to human beings which could allow us to dispense with politics (p. 110). At the same time he never became a sceptic about the activity of politics itself. Politics was not just a necessary evil as so many liberals argued; it was a realistic good (p. 141). Constitutions sought to bind the activities of rulers, but no constitution was better than the character of those who work it (p.148). The binding could never be permanent. But this was not a counsel of despair. Crick remained an optimist. "Politics can be used for good and deliberate ends" (p. 151).

Crick died in 2008. He was always attached to pragmatism and compromise, he hated extremes in politics and any attempt to exclude legitimate interests and beliefs because he believed that was the sure way to violence and disorder. He believed not in the inevitability of gradualness but the desirability of gradualness, because of his deep sense that to govern politically meant being prepared to undertake reform. To do so effectively politicians had to give themselves enough time and proceed slowly. Trying to move too fast invited disaster. But these views which so shaped his attitudes to Northern Ireland did not mean that he was in favour of some watered-down consensus, in which no-one should say anything for fear of offending others. Crick followed the maxim of Ernest Gellner - socially tolerant always, intellectually tolerant never. To the end he maintained that no progress of any kind was possible without political argument, political education and political participation, and that to achieve these politicians had to stop talking to themselves and engage with citizens, however uncomfortable and messy and less than ideal that may often turn out to be. As he put it in 1962, if we want to preserve the great achievement of free politics and republican government, we must deal with people as they are and not as we would like them to be (p. 200). He quoted Thomas Mann's despairing rejoinder to his brother in *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitisches*: "It would be a misunderstanding to believe that our politician is concerned with politics, that is reform, compromise, adaptation, mutual understanding between reality and spirit…and not rather with the grand gesture of the world turned upside down, the destruction of the state, permanent rebellion of the mob, revolution" (p. 169). This for Crick was the fundamental reason why politics had to be defended.