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## **An Apology for Politics. Its Greatness and Baseness**

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you know, I want to talk to you about the greatness and the baseness of politics. Yesterday, a friend remarked that the title already said it all. And that just these two words, greatness and baseness, are the starting-point for anyone interested in thinking about the state of politics and the status of politicians. But I imagine you expect me to say rather more than this. I shall try to do so.

I am giving this address at what is perhaps not the best moment. Or perhaps it is indeed opportune, because you might also think that now is precisely the moment when a defence of politics is needed. What I am not sure of is whether I, as an active politician, am the best person to be giving it. But since there are very few people prepared to do it, I will take on the task, since I have a first-hand, insider's knowledge of politics, and I know about what may be reproachable in politicians' conduct

Everyone feels entitled to criticise politics and politicians. Whenever anyone talks about politics they talk about disillusionment, scepticism and lack of interest. I think this attitude is wrong and indeed unfair, but there is an explanation for it and, indeed, some justification. On the other hand it is true that since politicians act on behalf of the public, their actions need to be subject to particular scrutiny. As politicians we deal with public funds and assets, that is, funds and assets that belong to everybody. However, I feel that society needs to recover the prestige and dignity of politics. For while it is true that there is a baseness of politics and of politicians, there may also be an intrinsic greatness in service for the common good, which can only be achieved through politics. It is true that there are other ways of serving the common good, but there are some important aspects of this service that can only be achieved through politics.

To light-heartedly and systematically adopt an attitude of mistrust, contempt or rejection towards politics can be very harmful for society, in two respects: because society needs politicians and because this attitude implies people are declining to shoulder their individual and collective responsibilities.

An example: sometimes, when I go to officially open a school, the parents, the teachers and the mayor are there, and I say, "The Government of Catalonia has a responsibility for children's education, as do the teachers and the local council, but the ones who are chiefly responsible are you, the parents". Naturally, the public administrations must help, and the teachers play a vital role, but the main responsibility lies with the parents. I often find that some

parents, sections of the opposition or some journalist will criticise me for shifting responsibility to the parents. As a government we cannot shirk our responsibility, nor can the opposition shirk theirs; but neither can parents. One way of shirking it is to say, "It is up to the politicians and teachers to deal with it". It's very easy to say, "If things don't work then it's the politicians' fault, and in this case the teachers' fault too". This is an example of the rejection and under-appreciation of politics. This is bad from the politicians' point of view, but also from the point of view of the people, and it is particularly bad for their children.

Before going further into this there are two points I must clarify. The first is that this speech has no aims beyond its immediate concerns. I am not giving it in order to explain or justify the current policies of the Generalitat or of CiU. I observe politics from the point of view of someone who has been in it for a long time, and at the same time with the hope of helping to create constructive attitudes for the future. At all events, that was what made me want to give this address, not the itch for political debate.

The second point I want to clarify is that I have not come here to complain. I have no right to complain. If I'm in politics it's because I want to be. No-one made me do it. Also I have had many compensations, some of them very great ones, for most of which I have to thank the people of Catalonia.

So I am not complaining. I simply want to explain something about what a politician's job is, and, at this time when it is a job which is not held in very high esteem, to show how necessary it is, and even to show that in principle—and often in practice—it is a job with a certain moral stature. I also want to ask people to judge politics and politicians with all the rigour they like, but when they do so, to make an effort to be responsible and objective. This is desirable for the good of society itself.

It should be said that this disenchantment with politicians is not exclusive to Catalonia. In many European countries politics and politicians are not held in high esteem, nor indeed are they in America. Some years ago a Gallup poll in the US revealed that many mothers would like their children to become president of the United States, but would not want them to be politicians. Impossible of course, and quite irrational.

What can be the reason for this? Some say that politicians give the impression of not being interested enough in people. And it is true that, in my view, the first requirement for a politician is to have a real interest in people, indeed, to love people. How many politicians really take such an interest?

I believe it is difficult to be deeply involved in politics for a long period without being truly interested in people. However, I would have to admit that there are many politicians whose careerism, ambition or vanity suffocate this interest. Or perhaps habit makes it all routine for them.

There is a consideration which you should understand, and which sometimes leads to quite dramatic situations: there may come a time in politicians' lives

when they are unable to continue. Perhaps because, having entered politics very young, one fine day find they themselves unable to continue—because they have lost the elections, because they find themselves sidelined, or for whatever reason. From time to time someone comes to see me—a mayor, or perhaps a minister in my government—who says, "Look, after the next elections, I don't want to go on". Typically, these mayors' reasoning goes like this: "Here I am, 50 years old, and I still have it in me to do something else, to start a business, perhaps. But if I stay any longer, sooner or later I'll be out on my ear and then it will be very difficult for me to pick up the pieces". The public is unaware of these problems. The fact is that, as I said, someone who is deeply involved in politics for a long period is interested in people, because it is very difficult to be an effective politician if you do not like the work, as is the case with any human activity, and so to like the job of being a politician you must like people.

There are also those who say that more and more people consider that politicians are losing the power of decision-making, that more and more power is passing into the hands of international bodies, multinational companies, technocrats, the markets, or indeed the European Union. It is however true that, under the same conditions, some countries do better, thanks to their policies, than other countries in which other policies are being applied, in spite of the fact that they are subject to the same restrictions.

There are also those who attribute the problem to corruption. But there has always been corruption. It has always been said that "power corrupts". More, or less, than now? I think that now there is less corruption, because now there is much tighter control—by the opposition, the press, by society in general. Formerly, corruption was not so exposed to view, and people were more acquiescent about it. I will come back to this shortly.

Another cause may be what one writer called democracy's "negative dialectic". Democracy involves—and in part this is what makes it the best political system there is—constant confrontation between politicians. This means that a great deal of the discredit of politics and politicians is brought about by the politicians themselves through the constant barrage of insults they hurl at each other, which often, very often indeed, are based on shaky accusations. A barrage which becomes a dreary cacophony. Politicians form the only guild whose aim is not to defend its members, but rather to discredit them, even ruin them. And accusations of corruption—sometimes justified but very often baseless—are amongst the favourite ammunition in political rivalry.

To some extent this has always been so. And to some extent the press—or simply the information that reaches the public—has always played an important role. Nobody, least of all the politicians, can set out to kill the messenger. And I think it was Tocqueville who said that in a free society, press freedom is more important than political parties. But it is nonetheless true that now, more than ever, the media have a formidable power to magnify events which often serves to discredit politicians. In his book *Profiles of Courage*, John F. Kennedy wrote,

over 40 years ago, "These days political courage (by which I mean the attitudes needed to take risky decisions that are difficult for the public to understand) is more difficult than ever. This is due to the fact that our daily life is so much more subject to the impact of mass communication that any unpopular or out-of-the-ordinary act may raise a storm of protests the like of which John Quincy Adams could never have imagined in 1807".

I mention the affair of 1807, because the second Adams is one of the people Kennedy studied. He took a very difficult decision which made him very unpopular and he was removed from office. But eventually, when he was very old, he became president of the United States. But according to Kennedy, the campaign against Adams in 1807 was nothing compared with what the modern media are capable of doing.

Let me repeat: it is not a question of killing the messenger. The media have the duty to inform. But such is their power that they really must subject themselves to a certain critical introspection. That is, they have the duty to be very careful. They have the duty, for example, to analyze why it is that so often, in fact on the great majority of occasions, the accusations politicians hurl at one another in the media—the barrage I referred to earlier—are shown to be baseless when they come to court, if not earlier.

In spite of all this, however, one thing is clear: politics is necessary. This is true in general and it is true of the democratic version based on parties. There is no democracy without political parties. And politics is necessary because without it the administration of a country or society is hobbled and incomplete. For while it is true that civil society alone can contribute a great deal towards building a country and society, on its own it is unable to finish the task and consolidate it. For that, politics is needed.

The aim of politics is service to the community. It is, therefore, by definition a noble activity. And that service—this is very important—must be performed with an overall vision, in the general interest. This is important, because there are ways of serving the community which are very laudable, but which are not performed with this overall vision. This is an important factor in the greatness of politics. Let me make it clear that this "overall vision" is applicable at all levels of political action, even in a village. It means not to act piecemeal within the territory in question, nor in favour only of particular groups.

For example, the mayor of a village or small town has a neighbours' association that wants a civic centre, some teachers who demand a new school, some farmers who want a new track to reach their fields and woods, some people who want an industrial estate to be built, and a pressure group that says that the most important thing is to save a little wood which is in danger because a few trees would have to be felled to make the track the farmers want. This is the sort of thing faced by the mayors of small towns and villages, and everyone is quite sure about what they want. The ecologists want to preserve the pine-trees, the farmers want the track, the industrialists want the factory sites and the

neighbours' association wants the civic centre, but the one whose job it is to resolve the matter must do so with an overall vision.

The other fact that has to be stressed is that it is the politicians, more than anyone else, who are accountable to the people for their actions. It is they more than anyone who assume public responsibility.

Public responsibility and overall responsibility. And there is yet another fact that must be stressed: politicians must take decisions. To decide and to resolve: two concepts that are very closely-related, but which do not completely coincide.

I would now like to consider these three ideas again from a different angle:

-1 A question: to whom is the manager of an NGO accountable? We can say many positive things about the NGOs as a whole, but again, to whom are they responsible? To whom are they accountable for their mistakes when they make them?

The same question could be asked of a journalist or an academic. They are all people who offer their opinions, and often their opinions are useful and valuable. Very often. But what responsibility do they bear for the country? No-one calls them to account when they make mistakes.

But politicians are called to account. Every four or five years they must submit themselves to the judgement of the electorate. The media are watching them and are ready to denounce their errors, real or supposed. Not to mention the opposition. This is so even when the political climate is civilized and respectful, that is, without degenerating into the barrage of insults I mentioned earlier.

Here is an example. Thirty years ago the Club of Rome, which was and is a very respectable organization, came out in favour of zero growth because we were in the process of exhausting our natural resources. That was a mistaken attitude. If any government had paid them attention and pursued a zero-growth policy, the electorate would have thrown them out at the next elections. On the other hand, no-one has called the Club of Rome to account for the mistake. There are even those who declare that this mistake was useful, because it led us to study the question of sustainability. But it was an error which no-one finds it necessary to remember and which governments fortunately did not adopt in their policies.

When such decisions are taken, no-one puts their status or prestige or viability on the line except politicians.

If one day Catalan Television were performing very badly, because of financial problems or loss of audience or poor programming or bias, or if it failed to meet the aims of our linguistic policy, or if there were a failure of whatever sort, who would be held responsible? The government and parliament would. That is to say, the politicians. And perhaps the director-general of the Corporation. But nobody else.

And if the economy is not going well enough, the standard of living falls, and we become less competitive, who will be taken to task? Not academic economists, not businesspeople, nor journalists, but the government, the politicians.

Politicians, above all, are the ones the country holds responsible. I would not say exclusively, but almost exclusively. And this is one of the things that confers greatness on politics. The greatness and nobility that derive from commitment, the risk of error, the risk of incomprehension, even of self-dissatisfaction.

-2 There are many people who are ready to make an effort for a day, a year, for two or three years. But how many are prepared to devote years or decades, or whatever it takes, to a cause? Prepared to make a permanent, ongoing public commitment?

There are many people like this in the NGOs, in movements within the Church and indeed in many other organizations. That is to say, this is a common trait which is shared with other forms of public service. But in politics this type of commitment is particularly strong, and this is very positive.

-3 There are, as I have said, NGOs, citizens' pressure groups and social and cultural organizations that stand up for a particular cause, often a very important one. And there are neighbours' associations that demand improvements for their districts, perfectly legitimately. But no matter how legitimate these demands are, they still represent private interests or only partial aspects of public interest.

I was recently reading a French writer who complained that these days, according to him less than before, "there is no general will which is considered to be over and above the prosaic range of individual interests". He said that at the moment there is a scarcity of what he calls the "general will", which I prefer to call a sense of the public interest.

This is precisely a deficit in politics. And it is the politician—the politician, not the civil service expert—who has to interpret this public interest and take appropriate decisions. That is politics. At least it is what politics ought to be. This is another aspect that lends greatness.

– 4 All this leads us to the other point which I have just mentioned: politicians must take decisions. Everyone takes decisions, of course. At home, in business, at the sports club, in a cooperative. But I am talking about decisions for which politicians must be accountable before the people. Public decisions that must take account of many conflicting interests, conflicts that politicians must resolve. It is politicians, more than anyone, who resolve and decide. This may not be done one-sidedly; there must be an overall vision of the problems.

We constantly receive manifestos, opinions and proposals; protests, too. Even very well-executed technical studies, not to mention criticisms that are often justified, as well as pressure from the street, from the party itself and from the voters. Often all of this is mutually contradictory, and even at odds with reality.

With all this on the table, politicians have to decide. And resolve. It is the politicians who must do this, not academics, nor economic powers, nor ecologists, not the NGOs or the journalists, not the image consultants nor any lobby. Many of these may provide valuable advice, but it is for the politicians to decide, amongst other reasons because it is they who are responsible before the people, they who shoulder by far the most responsibility.

Recently I was speaking to some university teachers who had been on a demonstration with the slogan "Another Europe is possible". I asked them what this other Europe might be like and how it might be built. They replied that they did not know, that that was up to me and other politicians; they merely wanted to express the dissatisfaction they and others like them felt about Europe as it is. I replied, "You've got it very easy". They agreed. But politicians do not have it so easy.

I find these teachers' attitude quite reasonable. But it is an attitude that cannot be assumed by a politician. Politicians must choose and take decisions. They must commit themselves. They must run the risk of making mistakes. And this precisely is a factor in the greatness of politics.

Now, if you were to argue that all this is all very well and good, but the fact of the matter is that politicians do not measure up to this greatness which I believe is intrinsic to politics, but rather descend into baseness, I would admit that, in part, you would be right.

I have already described how we politicians contribute to our own discredit (with the aid of others). But we are not the only ones who often do not do things as well as we ought. We are, however, the most visible.

Some philosophers (Plato, for example) have asserted that public service, service to the *res publica*, is so important that politicians should be men of great virtue and wisdom. They have written of government by the wise and good. However, this is not possible, and could even be negative. The wise do not necessarily make good governors, nor do the good necessarily have the pulse of the people. In fact, experiments along these lines have not generally met with success.

We can, however, demand certain qualities of our politicians, though it is not the aim of this address to discuss this. Nor am I probably the most suitable person to do so. But it would perhaps be a good idea for our society to reflect on this calmly, leaving aside specific parties and politicians. Such a reflection should include criticisms of politicians and certain ways of doing politics—including some self-criticism by the politicians themselves—and should also analyze the nature of political action, which is very different, as I have said, from other jobs and professions.

Such a reflection would probably define certain qualities and attitudes that a politician ought to have. For example, a politician should have convictions, character and a sense of the common good. This seems rather obvious, but in

practice it is not so obvious. Nor so simple. Remember that Max Weber said that there is an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of conviction, and the two do not always coincide.

An important German politician once remarked to me, "More than once I have had to put the common good before my own convictions". And I, who knew what he was referring to, believe that he had acted honourably.

This can happen. But it ought to hurt, it ought to make anyone who does it bleed. Then they should go back as swiftly as possible to their convictions.

Three or four years ago I was invited to the Vatican to contribute to the Defence of the Family and of Life in Western Europe Commission of the Gathering of European Legislators organized by the Pontifical Council for the Family, whose central theme was "Human rights and Family Rights". I was not a reporter but I was a speaker, and it so happened that just eight days earlier the Parliament of Catalonia had approved the law, proposed by my party, which was commonly known as the "De Facto Couples' law". It was not the best introduction for someone joining that debate. There were many important people at that meeting, many cardinals, very positive, and open minded, it must be said. I was not insulted, but I was questioned: "How is it that you, who profess to be a Catholic man, could have promoted such a law?". I replied, "It so happens that we have a social reality that we must pay heed to, and within this social reality very unjust situations may befall certain people if we do not take certain measures; hence we have done this, albeit with limits, for clearly we resisted pressure from some quarters to go further". Since I saw that they were not fully convinced, I went on to say, "In this room there are a number of German Christian Democrat members of parliament who have voted, or whose party has voted, for a new abortion law. Why did they vote for this law?". For this reason: that there was a rather restrictive abortion law in Western Germany, but when reunification occurred they found that there was another abortion law in Eastern Germany that was extremely permissive. This issue had to be resolved, because otherwise a woman in Leipzig could have an abortion anywhere under any circumstances, whereas one from Frankfurt could not, with all the dubious implications of this. So they unified the two laws, greatly reducing the permissiveness of the East German, former Communist, law, while relaxing somewhat the West German law, introducing some slightly less stringent conditions. This required a two-thirds majority, but it turned out that the Socialists, ex-Communists, Liberals and Greens, who had been in favour of a more permissive law, could not muster two-thirds of the votes between them. Hence the new law could not be passed unless 30 or 40 Christian Democrats voted in favour of it. And so it was.

As our gathering ended I met a Christian Democrat deputy who said to me, "I want to tell you that I am a radical anti-abortionist and I voted for the law. What is more, I arranged amongst our deputies who would have to vote in favour in order for it to go through. I have to say that that night I couldn't sleep, but it was a case in which I and my party had to put what we felt was the common good—

to avoid a split over this matter—before our convictions". This is a particularly dramatic example: not just a question of a bit more tax or some infrastructure, but something that affected people's deeply-held personal convictions. This lady was very emotional and tearful as she told me this. I don't know what happened the following Sunday when she went to mass and met the priest and her friends, but someone had to take this decision. I dare not say whether their decision was good or bad, but it is an example of what can sometimes happen.

Another quality of a real politician is courage. No-one can be an important politician without courage, courage commensurate with their importance. But even this is not simple. Courage cannot always be expressed in a simple, black-and-white way. I would not go so far as the English politician John Morley, who in a biography of Gladstone went so far as to say that politics is an activity in which one must constantly choose between two absurdities. That is not so. But it is true to say that courage is often needed to take decisions which are unclear. They are decisions which do not cause private satisfaction. They are decisions that sometimes need a negotiator's courage, because, as I have said on previous occasions, any negotiator may soon be seen as a traitor in the eyes of his own people. The courage, therefore, to risk unpopularity amongst your own people. And finally the courage that is needed to work for the next generation, and not merely for the next elections. The courage needed to take decisions for which you receive no thanks, but quite the opposite.

I once made a speech describing the courage and the capacity for self-sacrifice of one of the politicians I admire, Sadat. Or, for example, the courage shown by Collins in the Irish Rebellion. In a certain way, it was the case with De Gaulle, who at certain times showed a great moral fortitude and capacity for confronting his own people: "We're not on the right track. I know I have always told you this, but what I am saying now is that by doing this we are not on the right track." In fact, De Gaulle did not sacrifice himself but he came close to doing so. A couple of times he came very close.

At the present time, Israel and Palestine need politicians able to stand up to their own people, to gainsay them and able to sacrifice themselves. To some extent this is what Rabin did. The situation is not usually as dramatic as this, but every day politicians have to take such decisions. "I don't like doing this, I'm not at all happy about it", one may think, although the matter in question is not so dramatic as the abortion situation I mentioned just now. Therefore, politicians need the courage to be unpopular amongst their own people. That is what Kennedy's study was about.

In many countries without the complexes so many Catalans have, we would say that one of the virtues a good politician needs is patriotism. Understood in two ways: beginning at grass-roots level with a love for the people, for the land and those that surround you, but also as a love for the country itself.

Some may ask, if politics is so fraught with problems, why do we get involved in it? Or they may assert that what I have said only goes to prove that there can

never be enough coherence or dignity in politics, nor enough spirit of service, nor enough honesty. Such things could be said, but I began by saying I have not come here to complain. Personally, like many others, I assume the responsibility and the servitude of politics.

I know that "the spring never runs clean". I know that a politician's vocation consists of a mixture of ambition for power, vanity, sometimes careerism, desire to serve and idealism. Not all of these ingredients are necessarily present in the DNA of each and every politician. But in most of them they are there, in varying proportions. The result varies, and is sometimes bad. But sometimes these elements are present in proportions that result in a real will to serve the community.

Those blessed with such a mixture can take part in politics with joy and enthusiasm, with conviction and at the same time with responsibility. And with that patriotism—do not smile—which I described just now. Someone said to me—and this is why I said "Don't smile"—that it is impossible for ideals, altruism and enthusiasm to germinate in an environment as tumultuous as politics, dominated as it is by quarrels and sometimes punches below the belt, and besieged as it is by conflicts of interest. But the fact is that these positive attributes must already have taken root before entering politics. One must enter politics in the service of an ideal, a project, a vision of a country and a society, of a nation; with convictions that are already formed. There is no need to have studied political science in order to enter politics. Education is necessary, of course, appropriate to the circumstances. But above all one must have a positive attitude.

I said just now that the spring never runs quite clean. But if we want a politics that is worthy of respect, many must enter it with their convictions, with a vision and a real vocation for service.

This is very important for young politicians. Politics has so many pitfalls and temptations that those who enter it need to be well prepared, and to be equipped with a body of ethical principles, lest the bad things about politics be learnt before the good.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wanted to talk to about politics and politicians in a way that practising politicians rarely do. According to how you look at it, that may be the only good thing about this speech. I recognize that some of the difficult points I have covered do form part of the very nature of politics. At all events, it is an invitation to political leaders and society in general to think about the question, and to bear these points in mind when they take decisions, make pronouncements or form judgements. Because while those most responsible for making politics effective and at the same time principled are the politicians, non-politicians must also bear part of this responsibility.

Thank you very much.