

SPEECH TO THE ELECTORS OF BRISTOL*Edmund Burke***3 Nov. 1774****SPEECH TO THE ELECTORS OF BRISTOL, ON HIS BEING DECLARED BY THE SHERIFFS DULY ELECTED ONE OF THE REPRESENTATIVES IN PARLIAMENT FOR THAT CITY, ON THURSDAY, THE 3D OF NOVEMBER, 1774¹.**

Gentlemen,—I cannot avoid sympathizing strongly with the feelings of the gentleman who has received the same honor that you have conferred on me. If he, who was bred and passed his whole life amongst you,—if he, who, through the easy gradations of acquaintance, friendship, and esteem, has obtained the honor which seems of itself, naturally and almost insensibly, to meet with those who, by the even tenor of pleasing manners and social virtues, slide into the love and confidence of their fellow-citizens,—if he cannot speak but with great emotion on this subject, surrounded as he is on all sides with his old friends,— you will have the goodness to excuse me, if my real, unaffected embarrassment prevents me from expressing my gratitude to you as I ought.

I was brought hither under the disadvantage of being unknown, even by sight, to any of you. No previous canvass was made for me. I was put in nomination after the poll was opened. I did not appear until it was far advanced. If, under all these accumulated disadvantages, your good opinion has carried me to this happy point of success, you will pardon me, if I can only say to you collectively, as I said to you individually, simply and plainly, I thank you,—I am obliged to you,—I am not insensible of your kindness.

¹ in: NIMMO, J. C. (ed.). 1887. *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, in Twelve Volumes V*. II. London: s/n. Disponível em: <http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3113/burke/Works02.pdf> Acesso em: 29. nov.2023).

This is all that I am able to say for the inestimable favor you have conferred upon me. But I cannot be satisfied without saying a little more in defence of the right you have to confer such a favor. The person that appeared here as counsel for the candidate who so long and so earnestly solicited your votes thinks proper to deny that a very great part of you have any votes to give. He fixes a standard period of time in his own imagination, (not what the law defines, but merely what the convenience of his client suggests,) by which he would cut off at one stroke all those freedoms which are the dearest privileges of your corporation,—which the Common Law authorizes,—which your magistrates are compelled to grant,—which come duly authenticated into this court,—and are saved in the clearest words, and with the most religious care and tenderness, in that very act of Parliament which was made to regulate the elections by freemen, and to prevent all possible abuses in making them.

I do not intend to argue the matter here. My learned counsel has supported your cause with his usual ability; the worthy sheriffs have acted with their usual equity; and I have no doubt that the same equity which dictates the return will guide the final determination. I had the honor, in conjunction with many far wiser men, to contribute a very small assistance, but, however, some assistance, to the forming the judicature which is to try such questions. It would be unnatural in me to doubt the justice of that court, in the trial of my own cause, to which I have been so active to give jurisdiction over every other.

I assure the worthy freemen, and this corporation, that, if the gentleman perseveres in the intentions which his present warmth dictates to him, I will attend their cause with diligence, and I hope with effect. For, if I know anything of myself, it is not my own interest in it, but my full conviction, that induces me to tell you, I think there is not a shadow of doubt in the case.

I do not imagine that you find me rash in declaring myself, or very forward in troubling you. From the beginning to the end of the election, I have kept silence in all matters of discussion. I have never asked a question of a voter on the other side, or supported a doubtful vote on my own. I respected the abilities of my managers; I relied on the candor of the court. I think the worthy sheriffs will bear me witness that I have never once made an attempt to

impose upon their reason, to surprise their justice, or to ruffle their temper. I stood on the hustings (except when I gave my thanks to those who favored me with their votes) less like a candidate than an unconcerned spectator of a public proceeding. But here the face of things is altered. Here is an attempt for a general massacre of suffrages,—an attempt, by a promiscuous carnage of friends and foes, to exterminate above two thousand votes, including seven hundred polled for the gentleman himself who now complains, and who would destroy the friends whom he has obtained, only because he cannot obtain as many of them as he wishes.

How he will be permitted, in another place, to stultify and disable himself, and to plead against his own acts, is another question. The law will decide it. I shall only speak of it as it concerns the propriety of public conduct in this city. I do not pretend to lay down rules of decorum for other gentlemen. They are best judges of the mode of proceeding that will recommend them to the favor of their fellow-citizens. But I confess I should look rather awkward, if I had been the very first to produce the new copies of freedom,—if I had persisted in producing them to the last,—if I had ransacked, with the most unremitting industry and the most penetrating research, the remotest corners of the kingdom to discover them,—if I were then, all at once, to turn short, and declare that I had been sporting all this while with the right of election, and that I had been drawing out a poll, upon no sort of rational grounds, which disturbed the peace of my fellow-citizens for a month together;—I really, for my part, should appear awkward under such circumstances.

It would be still more awkward in me, if I were gravely to look the sheriffs in the face, and to tell them they were not to determine my cause on my own principles, nor to make the return upon those votes upon which I had rested my election. Such would be my appearance to the court and magistrates.

But how should I appear to the voters themselves? If I had gone round to the citizens entitled to freedom, and squeezed them by the hand,—“Sir, I humbly beg your vote,—I shall be eternally thankful,—may I hope for the honor of your support?—Well!—come,—we shall see you at the Council-House.”—If I were then to deliver them to my managers, pack them into tallies, vote them off in court, and when I heard from the bar,—“Such a one only! and

such a one forever!—he’s my man!”—“Thank you, good Sir,—Hah! my worthy friend! thank you kindly,—that’s an honest fellow,—how is your good family?”—Whilst these words were hardly out of my mouth, if I should have wheeled round at once, and told them,—“Get you gone, you pack of worthless fellows! you have no votes,—you are usurpers! you are intruders on the rights of real freemen! I will have nothing to do with you! you ought never to have been produced at this election, and the sheriffs ought not to have admitted you to poll!”—

Gentlemen, I should make a strange figure, if my conduct had been of this sort. I am not so old an acquaintance of yours as the worthy gentleman. Indeed, I could not have ventured on such kind of freedoms with you. But I am bound, and I will endeavor, to have justice done to the rights of freemen,—even though I should at the same time be obliged to vindicate the former² part of my antagonist’s conduct against his own present inclinations.

I owe myself, in all things, to all the freemen of this city. My particular friends have a demand on me that I should not deceive their expectations. Never was cause or man supported with more constancy, more activity, more spirit. I have been supported with a zeal, indeed, and heartiness in my friends, which (if their object had been at all proportioned to their endeavors) could never be sufficiently commended. They supported me upon the most liberal principles. They wished that the members for Bristol should be chosen for the city, and for their country at large, and not for themselves.

So far they are not disappointed. If I possess nothing else, I am sure I possess the temper that is fit for your service. I know nothing of Bristol, but by the favors I have received, and the virtues I have seen exerted in it.

I shall ever retain, what I now feel, the most perfect and grateful attachment to my friends, —and I have no enmities, no resentments. I never can consider fidelity to engagements and constancy in friendships but with the highest approbation, even when those noble qualities are employed against my own pretensions. The gentleman who is not so fortunate as I have been in this contest enjoys, in this respect, a consolation full of honor both to himself and to his friends.

² Mr. Brickdale opened his poll, it seems, with a tally of those very kind of freemen, and voted many hundreds of them.

They have certainly left nothing undone for his service.

As for the trifling petulance which the rage of party stirs up in little minds, though it should show itself even in this court, it has not made the slightest impression on me. The highest flight of such clamorous birds is winged in an inferior region of the air. We hear them, and we look upon them, just as you, Gentlemen, when you enjoy the serene air on your lofty rocks, look down upon the gulls that skim the mud of your river, when it is exhausted of its tide.

I am sorry I cannot conclude without saying a word on a topic touched upon by my worthy colleague. I wish that topic had been passed by at a time when I have so little leisure to discuss it. But since he has thought proper to throw it out, I owe you a clear explanation of my poor sentiments on that subject.

He tells you that “the topic of instructions has occasioned much altercation and uneasiness in this city”; and he expresses himself (if I understand him rightly) in favor of the coercive authority of such instructions.

Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinions high respect; their business unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfactions, to theirs,—and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own.

But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure,—no, nor from the law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

My worthy colleague says, his will ought to be subservient to yours. If that be all, the thing is innocent. If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that in which the determination precedes the discussion, in which one set

of men deliberate and another decide, and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps three hundred miles distant from those who hear the arguments?

To deliver an opinion is the right of all men; that of constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a representative ought always to rejoice to hear, and which he ought always most seriously to consider. But authoritative instructions, mandates issued, which the member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgment and conscience,—these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land, and which arise from a fundamental mistake of the whole order and tenor of our Constitution.

Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole—where not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member, indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament. If the local constituent should have an interest or should form an hasty opinion evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the community, the member for that place ought to be as far as any other from any endeavor to give it effect. I beg pardon for saying so much on this subject; I have been unwillingly drawn into it; but I shall ever use a respectful frankness of communication with you. Your faithful friend, your devoted servant, I shall be to the end of my life: a flatterer you do not wish for. On this point of instructions, however, I think it scarcely possible we ever can have any sort of difference. Perhaps I may give you too much, rather than too little trouble.

From the first hour I was encouraged to court your favor, to this happy day of obtaining it, I have never promised you anything but humble and persevering endeavors to do my duty. The weight of that duty, I confess, makes me tremble; and whoever well considers what it is, of all things in the world, will fly from what has the least likeness to a positive and precipitate engagement. To be a good member of Parliament is, let me tell you, no easy task, —especially

at this time, when there is so strong a disposition to run into the perilous extremes of servile compliance or wild popularity. To unite circumspection with vigor is absolutely necessary, but it is extremely difficult. We are now members for a rich commercial city; this city, however, is but a part of a rich commercial nation, the interests of which are various, multiform, and intricate. We are members for that great nation, which, however, is itself but part of a great empire, extended by our virtue and our fortune to the farthest limits of the East and of the West. All these wide-spread interests must be considered,—must be compared,—must be reconciled, if possible. We are members for a free country; and surely we all know that the machine of a free constitution is no simple thing, but as intricate and as delicate as it is valuable. We are members in a great and ancient monarchy; and we must preserve religiously the true, legal rights of the sovereign, which form the keystone that binds together the noble and well-constructed arch of our empire and our Constitution. A constitution made up of balanced powers must ever be a critical thing. As such I mean to touch that part of it which comes within my reach. I know my inability, and I wish for support from every quarter. In particular I shall aim at the friendship, and shall cultivate the best correspondence, of the worthy colleague you have given me.

I trouble you no farther than once more to thank you all: you, Gentlemen, for your favors; the candidates, for their temperate and polite behavior; and the sheriffs, for a conduct which may give a model for all who are in public stations.