



THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Political obedience in our broken societies is not painted in black and white.

By Ray Pennings

Discussing unholy alliances in politics violates the wisdom usually attributed to Bismarck, namely that examining how laws and sausages are made is unhealthy for their continued enjoyment. The terminology we regularly resort to in describing these sorts of arrangements, whether “unholy alliance” or “devil’s advocate,” prompts an uneasy tension. If we take seriously the scriptural teaching that life in the “now but not yet” is spiritual warfare, requiring us to put on a spiritual armour to fight the devil and his schemes (Ephesians 6), then even considering to take his side in an argument is offensive. If we are to be ambassadors for Christ in all that we do, also in promoting justice through involvement in the political sphere, then we ought to oppose injustice.

Yet, the realities of everyday life do not seem as black and white as theory. There is reason to take care and think through the nature of the alliances that contemporary political engagement seems to demand of us in a pluralistic post-Christian culture. In answering this assignment, I will first reflect on a few generally underappreciated features of the political sphere before providing five practical guidelines which have benefitted me in my own journey.

FROM SPRING
2013 EDITION:
[cardus.ca/
comment/
archives](http://cardus.ca/comment/archives)



PROXIMATE JUSTICE

The guiding norm which ought to shape our political decision-making is justice. The political sphere involves the state exercising her God-given authority (the sword of Romans 13) in seeing justice implemented. Different traditions have different conceptions of what justice entails; my understanding of the term focuses on the appropriate relationship between different people and institutions. The image of the balance, so common in our legal system, helps us understand the notion of justice: there is a balance in the relationships in which everyone receives their appropriate due.

In thinking about justice and politics, it is important to realize that perfect justice, which is an attribute of God (Deuteronomy 32:4), is never fully realized on this earth. It is telling that both the Hebrew *tsedeq* and the Greek *dikaiois* are translated with both

the words justice and righteousness in most English translations, depending on the context. Human relationships, even at their best, do not manage perfect justice and righteousness. The finite earthly conceptions of justice that we deal with in our everyday political life are faint reflections of the biblical concept of justice. This is important to point out because if we are to only engage in an activity if we can live up to the perfect biblical standard, then it is impossible to live life. We would not be able to marry unless husbands could actually love their wives as Christ loves the church and we could not politic unless perfect justice could be achieved. Such idealism, while rightly longed for and worked toward, will have to wait for another world before it is realized.

Although this may seem self-evident, there are some who advocate a “purist” perspective on Christian politics who (selectively) miss this point. In suggesting that political engagement is only okay when a certain mix of conditions are met, they are implicitly suggesting that there is a defined lesser standard of justice (none of them would claim their conditions are perfect ones) which we can use as the line between acceptable and unacceptable politics. To suggest that a Christian may become involved in political party A but that it would be unchristian to support political party B involves a dangerous degree of interpretational hubris.

This is not to say that we relativize all of our decisions to the point where moral distinctions are lost. There are arguments to be made about decisions and the way in which

they contribute to, or detract from, an ordering of society that reflects biblical standards. Some policies, parties, or coalitions are much more appropriate than others for us to choose. But in all cases, the perfect option does not exist. Our best options involve proximate justice and leave much to be desired.

For some, this is disillusioning; but as Steven Garber so helpfully pointed out in his 2007 *Comment* article on proximate justice, coming to grips with this concept allows us to maintain perspective.

Proximate justice realizes that something is better than nothing. It allows us to make peace with some justice, some mercy, all the while realizing that it will only be in the new heaven and new earth that we find all our longings finally fulfilled, that we will see all of God’s demands finally met. It is only then—there we will see all of the conditions for human flourishing finally in place, socially, economically, and politically.

POLITICS IS A TEAM GAME

Confusion often enters here because some misunderstand what politics, including Christian political engagement, is essentially about. Politics is not about philosophy or theology; it isn’t about logic or policy. It is about power. To be involved politically is to engage in processes that contribute to determining and enforcing the laws by which a community lives by. At the end of the process, someone ends up with the authority to make decisions.

Without getting overly caught up in the complexities of political theory, we must acknowledge the essential social nature of politics. It is a team sport and cannot be played alone. Politics is contextual and involves how we live alongside our neighbours in the geographic space that we

share. The Scriptures also acknowledge this. We have in the early books of the Bible extensive detail regarding the legal system which was to govern Israel, but when Jeremiah spoke to the exiled Jews in Babylon, he instructed them to seek the welfare of Babylon (which certainly did



not follow the laws set for Israel) “for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

Some misunderstand politics and think that they can engage in politics apart from their neighbours with whom they disagree. It is as if an individual leader and his or her decision-making operate in a vacuum, separate from public opinion. What is forgotten is that individual opinions in politics are just that—opinions—and unless they are attached to organization and mobilization, they do not translate into influence or policy. Politics is not a debating society in which the aim is to have the best arguments. Political change is about convincing a majority of others (however that is defined in a specific context) to vote with you. It is about convincing the person who has won the right to make decisions to agree with your point of view. There are many factors which influence someone’s decision-making and often it is not the rightness or logic of the argument that wins the day.

I have met some whose notion of Christian politics is to “witness” through the political process, measuring their success simply by the rightness of the argument. If their solutions were such that made others oppose rather than vote with them, it was worn like a badge of honour. My point, lest I be misunderstood, is not that one ought to hide one’s convictions nor that the only opinions to be embraced are popular ones. To be sure, there are times when there is no option but to be an outsider and reject

all of the available options which present themselves. But those should be, I would argue, exceptional rather than regular circumstances. Whatever diagnosis one has regarding the contemporary political situation, considered relative to other times in world history, there is much we can be thankful for. If Daniel could maintain his integrity and serve for a combined seventy years in the palaces of Babylonian, Median, and Persian rulers, we should not be too quick to excuse ourselves from our political responsibilities and working with others just because the row may be difficult to hoe.

After twenty-five years of active political engagement, my idealism has certainly been smashed, but on most days I can still manage a sense of realistic optimism about the good that can be achieved through our political processes, not letting cynicism ruin the day. In practice, that means working alongside people whose worldview is diametrically opposed to mine. When it comes to policy, there are usually only two options—support or reject, Yay or Nay—and the enemy of my enemy becomes my friend. There are policies which may have noble objectives but if my neighbour is only willing to support it because of his own self-interest, I am still willing to take his support, especially if that is the difference between the proposal passing or not. If the Scriptures can describe so openly God using the sinful and self-interested strategies of foreign kings to accomplish divine purposes, I don’t need to be shy in accepting help from those whose motives

are dubious in promoting things that are good. I do not claim any providential tools or insight for my side but when in cleared-conscience obedience I pursue objectives that are good, I am very thankful for the sometimes surprising ways these objectives are implemented and often thank God for his providential provisions.

I recognize the temptations and dangers inherent in taking this approach but would argue from biblical directives and example that such are the challenges of biblical obedience in a broken world. That said, it is prudent to think through some guidelines that shape our political relationships. To say that it is possible to regularly work with those I disagree with is not to say that every such alliance is prudent. It is important to understand your disagreements (even when they are not publicly articulated) to better know when to enter, but also when to leave, alliances.

In outlining these guidelines, I take as a given that a Christian seeking to be involved in politics will also seek to be faithful in other aspects of their lives. The basics—of honesty and integrity, of belonging to a church community and holding oneself accountable within a community, and of being always ready to give reason of the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15), not ashamed of your Christian confession and identity—apply to Christian political life as well as to every other dimension of life. That, however, isn't always adequate to help make prudent decisions in the messiness of

the real-life opportunities with which we are sometimes presented. What follows are five political guidelines that, in retrospect, framed the choices I have made in political alliances that on the surface were uncomfortable.

1. Less is better. Seeking modest goals and incrementally working toward them is more realistic than grandiose goals.

Another political proverb usually attributed to Bismarck is that politics is the art of the possible. When an opportunity for political participation presents itself, whether that is voting for a candidate in an election who you would not prefer but is promoting a policy you agree with or working with others on an issue with whom there may be some short-term common interest, it is helpful to step back and define for yourself the steps in the process. There is no single guideline that will produce a "right" answer but when working with those I know I disagree with, I find it important to articulate (at least for myself) the nature and limits of the short-term agreement. Feminists and family value advocates may find themselves on the same side of a debate regarding polygamy and it may be prudent to cooperate, but it is important to understand the limits of that agreement. Good things can be accomplished through partnership in the short term but such cooperation is likely only possible or prudent with short-term, carefully defined goals. This also helps in limiting

cooperation to areas of agreement while protecting the right to publicly differ in areas of disagreement.

2. Recognize the difference between stopping regress and making progress. Political priorities are determined by an assessment of a given situation. Sometimes it is politically possible to advance a particular agenda, while at other times success can mean simply stopping things from getting worse. For example, a pro-life advocate might assess that the political climate is such that achieving any legislative progress in protecting unborn human life is impossible and so may tactically determine that promoting social programs which lessens the number of abortions is a more prudent way forward. This may open up the possibility of working with a new range of coalition partners. While such a stand may be the wise one, it is important to recognize that what is being accomplished is a reduction of harm but not the recognition in law of unborn human life.


3. Recognize that politics is about long-term relationships. In political terms, credibility and respect must be earned before arguments will be heard.

Although in theory one might think that all opinions are equal in a democratic society, this is hardly the case. The right to be listened to and taken seriously is one that needs to be earned. It is to be feared that many engage in politics after becoming excited by a particular issue and suddenly enter the process

after an extended period of disengagement. They become disillusioned when the people they must introduce themselves to, people who have been busy at the political game for a long time and have sacrificed significantly in public service, don't immediately fall over themselves to listen to the newcomer's insights and wisdom. The reality is that governing and leadership are complex, and experience, relationships, and the trust that comes from working together matters. If we are serious about political engagement, we need to work in partnership with others not simply on the issues which matter most to us, but also on the issues that matter to others. Christian politics is more about answering the questions our neighbours are asking than it is about pursuing a particular platform.

4. Recognize the dynamic nature of politics and the fact that loyalties and groupings will change. It would be naïve to engage in political partnerships and coalitions with a view that we are going to convince our partners to change to our ways of thinking. However, it is also unrealistic to expect that everyone will think the same way in the future as they do today. Politics is a dynamic business and not only the issues, but also our alliances and our own understandings and appreciation of issues change over time. Christian political engagement must be rooted in firm, principled convictions but also should be characterized by a listening spirit and a willingness to learn.

5. Our integrity is earned as much by how we go about our business as by what we say. Jesus instructed his disciples to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves,” even as he sent them out “as sheep among the wolves” (Matthew 10:16). In the reality of the political world, where self-interested pursuit of power is the norm and a competitive suspicion characterizes many of the relationships even among allies, there is great opportunity for a Christian witness and influence, not so much in what we advocate but in how we conduct ourselves. Many doors have been opened for good by men and women proving to be faithful, trustworthy, and diligent collaborators in the political realm. The perfect solution rarely exists and so it is the means of persuasion, rather than the substance of the matter, which is often the most decisive of our Christian influences.

There are no fool-proof guidelines that can protect us from difficult relationships in the political sphere. We are called to work in a messy world alongside others whose spiritual take is often hostile and antithetical to our own. And since we do believe that what we believe shapes how we live and think—a truth applied equally also to those who follow different faiths—working relationships and assumptions can be messy and difficult. However, God’s grace and promises apply here too, and history is witness that diligent service in the public square, accompanied by a healthy dose of sanctified common sense, can see us work alongside those who disagree with us to achieve much good. 



RAY PENNINGS is a co-founder of Cardus and currently serves as its Executive Vice President, working out of the Calgary office. He has long experience in Canadian industrial relations, as well as public policy, political activism, and political affairs generally. He has headed several of Cardus’ largest research projects over the years.

@COMMENTMAG



/COMMENTMAGAZINE

