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Sir John Colville The Qualities of a Statesman

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The Qualities of a Statesman

This Foundation has attracted, over the years, speakers of great eminence, many of whom have addressed you with both authority and experience on the vital and appropriate theme of a united Europe. It is vital because the future peace and prosperity of this continent depends to a large extent upon the success of the experiment. It is appropriate because, even if at present Switzerland shows no sign of wishing to join the E.E.C., it was after all here in Zurich, on 19th September, 1946, that Winston Churchill made his famous appeal to the Europeans to unite.

Churchill had a first-hand and intimate experience of the events leading to both the great world conflicts and he well knew that for many turbulent years the hostility of France and Germany had been the basic cause of War. He hoped that if the old motto "United we stand, divided we fall", were given a practical meaning in Europe, the German lion would learn to lie down with the French lamb and to purr instead of roaring. And so, indeed, it has.

It is unrealistic to expect that the noble ideals ardently pursued by men of European stature, such as Monsieur Monnet – who celebrates his 90th birthday in a few days' time – Monsieur Spaak, Lord Soames and Monsieur de Rougemont, will be translated into reality without sweat and tears, though we may certainly hope without blood. Indeed, the tender flower of organised European co-operation is even now wilting a little. I fear it is in some danger of being frosted, or at any rate chilled, by introverted, competitive and atavistic instincts of which several member states (including my own) find it hard to rid themselves. There is in the Central Banks and Ministries of Finance a strong resistance to any abdication of power; and I am afraid there is also a lack of imagination in most of Europe's political leaders together with an unwillingness, or inability, to grasp opportunities.

I have no claim to speak of complex European affairs in any capacity but that of a well-disposed observer. However, observers often take a more dispassionate view than those who are actively engaged or have long been

devoted partisans. There may be some aspects of Europe to-day which can usefully be examined from a detached view-point.

For instance many people feel that the Brussels bureaucracy concentrates too much on detail. It is precisely the details that tend to catch the public eye and give rise to irritation: and it sometimes appears that those sincere and diligent officials worship at the altar of uniformity. Diversity is the privilege of human beings, and the acceptance of important rules and regulations for the good of all should not exclude individual differences. Convergence of social and economic policies is one thing: inflexibility is quite another. I believe uniformity in matters of detail to be one of the most pernicious of false gods and a positive hindrance to the cause of unity.

There is no shortage of examples, at any rate in my country, of the Common Market losing support because of regulations emanating from Brussels about matters which are totally insignificant in the context of a united Europe. In saying this I do not by any means exclude the possibility that my countrymen may, on occasions, be unnecessarily touchy and make mountains out of comparatively unimportant molehills. My argument is that it would be better not to provide them with molehills.

It is easy to exaggerate, and I am sure that mischief is made by people basically hostile to the Common Market, by no means least in Government circles. All the same, small sources of irritation are ripples in a pool which spread outwards. They are usually of little importance in themselves. Nevertheless, collectively they create ill-will and they are nearly always unnecessary.

I believe the explanation may be simple. The ten thousand bureaucrats in Brussels are conscientious men and women. Since they have been denied the opportunity to work on great issues, they have in despair concentrated their energies on trivialities.

How these observations relate to the subject of my address to-night will, I hope, emerge from what I am now going to say.

Despite all the minor irritations, the seed of European integration has germinated. We must be patient and we must be realistic: we can only advance step by step. But I believe that if the new plant is to thrive, and to flower in full beauty, we should look beyond Brussels and set our hopes on the imaginative inspiration of a great European statesman: not an Englishman, or a German, or a Frenchman, but a man whose patriotic loyalty is to Europe.

Such a man must have power, and it is natural to ask whence that power would derive. There is no more brilliant or dedicated servant of Europe than Roy Jenkins. He has great influence, but he has no power. There are the zealous hardworking commissioners. They can express opinions and

originate proposals; but the power they wield is largely exercised behind closed doors. They excite little public interest and even less public enthusiasm. If the European Parliament, to be elected next year, lives up to our hopes and does not degenerate into a Tower of Babel, like the Assembly of the United Nations, it may throw up men and women who are heard with attention and sympathy. It may perhaps be from that source that a great leader will eventually spring.

Or perhaps the man, or woman, to lead and inspire Europe will be found in the Council of Europe. He would have to be one such as Bismarck or Disraeli, as Clemenceau or Churchill: one whose words bear weight and carry conviction far beyond his own frontiers. He must, however, be one whose ambition is not for the aggrandisement of Germany, or France, or Britain, but for the fruitful and unselfish co-operation of all the ancient, historic nations of Europe and, ultimately, for their genuine unification. I doubt if Bismarck, Disraeli or Clemenceau could have achieved that: but I think that Churchill, forty years younger, might have done so.

To-night I want to discuss what the essential qualities of a statesman are, and what distinguishes him from a mere politician. The obvious analogy is that of a strategist and a tactician. But we should not forget that some of the best strategists have also been brilliant tacticians. Among my compatriots Marlborough and Wellington are outstanding examples. In politics the combination is rarer, perhaps because the stage on which the politician must act is a wider one. The European stage is the widest and most challenging of all, for there are high and forbidding ridges of language, law, habit and tradition with which no President of the United States, or even a ruler of Russia, has ever had to contend. The Tsars and their successors in the Kremlin have indeed been faced by regional, racial and religious dissent. But they have always met those challenges with ruthlessness and a rigid central authority, both of which are mercifully denied to us Europeans.

A statesman's most distinguishing characteristic is his ability to inspire. He must also have courage, persistence, imagination and a thick skin. He must have the tenacity never to give up, never to be deflected from his objective – however many detours he makes in order to attain it – and never to despair.

It sometimes appears that such men only emerge in times of war or calamity. Certainly in this century, the two acknowledged statesmen in my country, Lloyd George and Churchill, bestrode the scene – in the case of Churchill, the world – because of the opportunities presented by war. But in searching for a European statesman we must exclude such an incentive, though it is conceivable that some great catastrophe, economic rather than

military, may descend on us and drive all minor considerations of national pride and prejudice into the background. Short of such a catastrophe – which might in any case turn out to be divisive rather than unifying – what are the qualities for which we must look?

I hope it is not too fanciful to draw your attention backwards, two or three thousand years, to the prophets of the Old Testament and to the Athens of Pericles. Not indeed to the Roman Empire, for that was built on armed force. The hegemony of Rome was won by trampling on countless tribes and peoples to the greater glory of the conqueror – an example which both Napoleon and Hitler tried and failed to copy. The Holy Roman Empire was an ideal with roots which only held fast when the Emperor was militarily omnipotent. Otherwise, in the words of the British historian, Lord Acton, it was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. The Communist International thrived, for a time, on the disillusionment of peoples harrowed, decimated and starved by war. It was soon seen to be nothing but the instrument of a new Russian imperialism. So let us return, briefly, to men and movements not, like the Christian Church or Islam, directed to the salvation of our souls — paramount thought that should doubtless be – but to the better ordering of our earthly existence.

The Old Testament prophets spoke to a superstitious audience. Their message, however, touched emotions which were not purely religious, nor wholly tribalistic. They spoke words of moral significance, and practical value, in the language of poetry. I am sure it was the poetry of Isaiah which moved the hearts of the Children of Israel. The men of Athens, too – Solon, Pericles and the ugly, argumentative, little philosopher, Socrates – were heard far beyond the city walls. They founded a civilisation, and a way of thought, which are basically those of the better elements in the western world to-day. These men were philosophers, law-givers and profound thinkers: but they were also, in the broadest sense, statesmen.

What I shall now try to do is to examine the qualities of the greatest statesman I have known, Winston Churchill; to see if there were in him at least some of the characteristics to be found in the Hebrew Prophets and the Greek Philosophers; and to examine whether those characteristics are the ones required for the European statesman on whom, I believe, the health and perhaps the very survival of a united Europe depends.

Before so doing, I hope I may be allowed to take issue with that able politician, Henry Kissinger, whose definition of a statesman was quoted by Lord Gladwyn in the Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture of February, 1974. To me Kissinger's definition represents precisely what a statesman is *not*.

Listen to this: "The statesman's view of human nature is wary; he is

conscious of many great hopes which have failed, of many good intentions that could not be realized, of selfishness and ambition and violence. He is, therefore, inclined to erect hedges against the possibility that even the most brilliant idea might prove abortive and that the most eloquent formulation might hide ulterior motives. He will try to avoid certain experiments, not because he would object to the results if they succeeded, but because he would feel himself responsible for the consequences if they failed. He is suspicious of those who personalize foreign policy, for history teaches him the fragility of structures dependent on individuals. To the statesman, gradualism is the essence of stability; he represents an area of average performance, of gradual change and slow construction”.

Kissinger was confusing the attributes of a statesman with those of a politician, perhaps subjectively, perhaps because his active life has been spent among politicians and he has known no statesmen. They have been in short supply in the United States for a good many years now! There is no doubt that the statesman should be a skilled politician. There are, however, hundreds of skilled politicians, within and without Europe, who have no claim to the title of statesman. Kissinger goes on to compare the statesman with the prophet, who offers his vision as the test and his good faith as a guarantee. It may, indeed, be only a matter of semantics on which I take issue with Kissinger: and indeed the statesman for whom I believe we must look is certainly a man of vision and of good faith. He must also be a man with the inspiration of a poet.

Churchill was, in essence and at heart, a poet, although he wrote no verses. I remember walking out of the House of Commons in June, 1940, after listening to one of his greatest speeches. I met the King's Private Secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles, who had also been listening to the speech. “It is too early to judge” he said to me, “whether Churchill will be a great Prime Minister. What I am certain is that he will go down in history as a great poet”. The romantic element in his nature, and his ability to mobilise the lessons of the past in surveying the present and the future, were vital components of his hold on the imagination and loyalty of millions. So was his mastery of language and his ability to express his ideas and his policy in words which were at once simple and profound, and which had the magnetic attraction of poetry. Good poetry has within it the elements of magic and it is for the intelligent use of magic that we look in vain to-day.

Since Churchill was the only man I have known well who qualifies, according to my definition, for the title of statesman – though I have met others, such as Dr. Chaim Weizmann, Sir Robert Menzies, President Truman and General de Gaulle who have a good claim to the title – I cannot do better than describe some of his qualities.

At the top of the list I place simplicity. He was capable of understanding complicated ideas, moral, philosophical and mechanical, though less, it must be admitted, the scientific or the economic. Anything he did not understand he required to be explained to him with lucidity. What he did understand, he imparted to others with penetrating clarity. In this he resembled the Greek law-givers and philosophers. In a world which becomes annually more complex, whether from technological discoveries or from the fog of financial, economic and political uncertainty, the clear beam of light which Churchill used to shine in the darkest corners is now distressingly absent. Lucidity is a powerful weapon: obscurity of thought and speech are emblems of impotence and precursors of conflict.

This is particularly true of the European community, and I think there is danger in the fact. Nobody has yet explained to the man in the street, in simple and inspiring terms which might set his imagination on fire, the glorious opportunities that a united Europe offers. So the first requisite of the statesman for whom we are looking is not to irritate and deter by concentration on detail and by insistence on uniformity, but to infect the masses with his own enthusiasm and his own certainty. He must have a vision that soars above Milk Marketing Boards, metric uniformity, Veterinary Regulations, and even above and beyond currency alignment. We cannot afford to be dilatory in our search for such a man: for if we fail to be united we may all too soon be in sight of what Churchill called «The cities of destruction and enslavement to which science holds the key».

Churchill had constant originality. He neither copied others nor accepted their views, unless he found their reasons and their arguments more convincing than his own. He did indeed listen to reason, but he was less susceptible to influence, by even his closest friends and associates, than any man I have ever known. When, in his last few years, he used to say “I am no longer capable of original thought”, it was, for him, tantamount to saying “I am dead”.

He was not, as many giants of the past have been, the creator of a political system, because he had the profoundest reverence for that in which he was brought up. He codified no laws, for he was proud of the British legal system. He built no empire, for his country already held sway over the largest there has ever been. He could, and did, confine both his originality and his creative powers to strengthening the foundations of what he passionately wished to preserve. And yet by temperament he was a radical rather than a conservative. He was one of the few great men in the political history of civilisation who was neither created by a revolution nor saw any need whatever to initiate one. Perhaps our European statesman, when we discover him, will also be a man who sees the merit of

existing foundations: who prefers to modify and enlarge rather than to destroy and rebuild. Yet I think that he, like Churchill, must have the instincts of a radical tempered by experience.

As I have already said, a successful statesman must have power: not the power of a dictator, but power that is reflected in the hearts and minds of those who sustain him. Churchill never tired of describing himself as the servant of the House of Commons. Even when he held undisputed sway over his fellow-countrymen he took no step without demanding the support, or at least the endorsement, first of the Cabinet and then of Parliament. Power, as we all know, corrupts. So do success and applause. Therefore a statesman must not only be personally incorruptible, but also one who recognises flattery and despises it. His reward is in finding that his acts are accepted and his aspirations shared by those he leads.

Churchill spent years in the wilderness and for a long time his words fell on deaf ears. Perhaps the school of early rejection is important to the education of a statesman. If that be so, then courage and persistence are high among the qualities he must possess. Churchill had both. He never gave up; he never despaired. Once convinced, he did not doubt his convictions. Retreat and surrender were words foreign to his vocabulary and when he yielded to the arguments of others – which he quite often did – it was only after long and searching enquiry. Unmoved by special pleading, or the advocacy of friends, his decisions rested solely on what he himself, rightly or wrongly, believed to be the merits of a case.

If a statesman must have self-confidence, and seldom allow himself to be a prey to doubt, he must also have flexibility. “Nature”, Churchill once said, “never draws a line without smudging it”. I doubt whether the Greeks, either philosophers or architects, would have supported that statement; but I think they, and most of us to-day, can agree with Churchill’s view that flexibility should be preferred to blind consistency. He expressed this conviction in these words: “The only way a man or woman can remain consistent amid changing circumstances is to change with them, while preserving the same dominating purpose”.

Foresight and a fertile imagination rank high in the statesman’s armoury. Nobody’s foresight is always correct, for the unexpected is a frequent intruder; but Churchill had an unusual endowment of it. For instance, at Christmas, 1944, he fought almost alone – against the Americans, the leading British newspapers and many of his own colleagues – to save Greece from being lost behind the Iron Curtain. At the time many people thought it a digression from more serious duties inspired by his zeal to save the Greek monarchy. Now we can see how important it was. Another example was his endeavour, this time unavailing, to persuade the Ameri-

cans to abandon the futile landing in the South of France in August, 1944, so that an irresistible Anglo-American assault might be made on Vienna and Budapest through the Ljubjana gap in Northern Yugoslavia. Thus, Eastern Europe would have been liberated by the Western powers long before the Soviet armies arrived on the scene. Europe, today, would have been a freer and more wholesome continent if Churchill's foresight and imagination had been allowed to triumph.

Some of the apparently intractable problems we now face, such as Rhodesia, might have been solved by the injection of a little Churchillian foresight – and persuasiveness. And who can tell what soothing influence a Zionist, who was at the same time a sincere friend of the Arabs, might have brought to bear on Middle Eastern antipathies?

I rate compassion and magnanimity among the most important of a statesman's qualities. Nowadays, compassion all too often means weakness and undue permissiveness. But it can and should be the companion of strength. To be magnanimous is also a virtue befitting the strong. Churchill seldom, if ever, bore a grudge. "I hate nobody", he once said to me, "except Hitler – and that is professional". He even felt sorry for the stricken and defeated Nazis, much as he abhorred their acts and their policies; and, at any rate initially, he deplored the decision to hold the Nuremberg trials. He found vindictiveness utterly distasteful and this is a characteristic which distinguishes him from General de Gaulle who, in courage, persistence and refusal to despair, had a number of Churchill's qualities.

As a young man Churchill had been disliked and bitterly opposed. But he never spoke ill of his former detractors and, provided he thought them honourable and patriotic, he had no hesitation in employing them in government service once he was in a position to do so. His treatment of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, who had kept him out of office for many years, was notably chivalrous. It was thus that those who had hated and mistrusted him ended by loving and serving him with enduring loyalty. It was thus, too, that when in 1955 he retired from office, the entire British nation, irrespective of party allegiance, bade him farewell with goodwill and gratitude. In this they were backed by the solid support of every country in the Western world; and his death, ten years later, was an occasion not only of national mourning but of international sorrow. For what other European leader is it conceivable that the Japanese as well as the Americans should have held a special exhibition to mark the centenary of his birth? Magnanimity is infectious: it speaks not only to friends but to those who were formerly bitter foes.

It is always easy to generalise. No single man, however brilliant, how-

ever far-seeing, can apply his genius to the solution of all the complicated problems, social as well as economic and political, with which modern society is struggling. It seems likely that as, with rapidly increasing acceleration, electronic devices assume the tasks hitherto performed by men, it will be impossible to provide full employment for growing populations. Our working lives will be drastically changed before this century ends, and so will our social habits. Again nobody has yet devised a method, apart from handing out doles in the forms of monetary aid, to bring to the seething masses of Asia, Africa and South America the material benefits which modern technology heaps on the fortunate inhabitants of developed countries. Yet we all know that such an imbalance is the prescription for turmoil and instability. So a European statesman – perhaps I should say an International statesman – must be one who not only leads and inspires, but has the ability to distinguish objectives of basic and lasting importance from the ephemeral preoccupations that engage the attention of national politicians. He cannot do without the serried ranks of honest, hard-working bureaucrats such as those in Brussels. He can, however, require them to scale mountains instead of devoting their time and effort to exploring and re-exploring a few unrewarding acres (or hectares) in the foothills of our society. Churchill used often to quote a saying of that great French soldier, Marshal Foch: “Frappez la masse et le reste vient par surcroît”. That applies no less to political than to military strategy.

I will end this lecture by giving you an account of a conversation which took place after dinner at Chequers towards the end of 1940. I wrote much of it down in the diary I kept in those exhilarating days. France had fallen, the invasion of our island was still threatened, the Battle of Britain had only just been won, we were Hitler’s sole active adversary, and most people outside Britain thought that Germany had won the war. We were alone; and we were still having to pay, from rapidly shrinking resources, for everything we bought in America.

“When we have won”, said Churchill as he gazed round the dining-room table, “we should try to arrange our affairs better. There must be a world organisation more effective than the League of Nations“. He went on to tell us what he hoped to participate in building, and how he foresaw the future. Germany might be divided, but she must remain part of the European family; for, he said, “Germany existed before the Gestapo”. There must be no war debts, no reparations and no territorial demands on Prussia (as he called Northern Germany), though there might be exchanges of population such as had been successfully achieved between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s. There would be five great European nations: Britain,

France, Italy, Spain and Prussia. There would also be four Confederations: The Northern, with its centre at The Hague; Mitteleuropa with its capital at Warsaw or Prague; the Danubian Confederation, centred on Vienna but also embracing Bavaria and the Southern German States; and the Balkans with Constantinople (as he persisted in calling Istanbul) as the capital. These nine powers would, he suggested, meet in a Council of Europe, with its own central judiciary and supreme economic body. All air forces, military and civil, would be internationalised, but each unit of the European Federation would retain its own militia, because democracy must be supported by a people's army and not by a police force alone. He believed that the Council of Europe should send one or two delegates to a World Council, where comparable groups, such as a Council representing the countries of South America, would also be represented by delegation. Thus the World Council which succeeded the League of Nations would be small and, by reason of its smallness, efficient and authoritative.

Of course, things did not turn out quite like that; though it is conceivable that one day the supreme World Body will be a smaller, more effective and less exhibitionist one than we have to-day. Perhaps there may, in the distant future, be delegates sent by groups of nations rather than by some 140 separate states.

I mention this 1940 conversation at Chequers partly because it shows that while in those days most people, in every nation and continent, could scarcely look a week ahead with confidence, one man at least found time to see visions of the future when at long last victory should be won, as he never doubted that it would be. And I think it is also worth recording because, to me at any rate, it provides an interpretation of Churchill's subsequent initiatives on the European scene.

So I did not find it surprising that here in Zurich, on that September day thirty-two years ago, Churchill returned to his theme of a united Europe. It was not, I am sure, to be a Europe from which Britain stood aloof. But it should not be overlooked that in 1946 Britain still had an empire which spanned a quarter of the world's surface, and she also had a relationship with the United States which war-time collaboration had made very close indeed. So I think it would be false to history to pretend that when Churchill spoke at Zurich of a united Europe, he had in mind a Federation in which his own country would be included.

Nevertheless, if a solution to the historic antagonism of France and Germany was his main objective, I believe that, in the spirit of those prophecies he made at Chequers in the dark days of 1940, he saw Britain as an active partner in a Council of Europe which should make its voice heard in a still larger Council of the World. Nor did he think that because Britain was

the focal point of a great Commonwealth and Empire, this need be a contradiction of her European role. Being a good footballer is no impediment to an enthusiasm for ski-ing. But I must tell you that the United Nations Organisation, constituted as it was in 1945, never seemed to Churchill a body likely to improve very much on the record of its impotent predecessor, the League of Nations, at any rate as far as the settlement of political disputes was concerned. I am sure he thought a well-established Council of Europe would play a more useful and a more practical role.

When Churchill came to power again, five years later, domestic and Commonwealth opposition to such a grand design, as well as the preoccupations of the cold war, gave him no scope to convert his vision into reality; and so he concentrated his energies, albeit unsuccessfully, on trying to end the cold war. But had he been sixty rather than nearly eighty years old, he might have had the strength and persuasive power to move the necessary mountains. Some of those mountains have now been moved, and they have given birth to something far more significant than the ridiculous mouse envisaged by the poet Horace. But even if the birth pangs are over, the growth and health of the infant call for nourishment even stronger than an efficient bureaucracy and debates in a European Parliament can provide. They call for the vision of a statesman who can enthuse the peoples by kindling a flame that warms our hearts and shines in our souls.

Twelfth Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture, given in the University of Zurich, 2nd November 1978.