

Personal View

When in 1941 Mr. Churchill met President Roosevelt to sign the Atlantic Charter "somewhere in the Atlantic," they were in fact in an enormous harbour half way across. It is called Placentia Bay. To the north it is bounded by a slip of land barely two miles wide, the Isthmus of Avalon, which happens to be one of the foggiest spots on earth. This isthmus joins the Avalon Peninsula to the main body of Newfoundland.

I have lived in Avalon for seven years, just long enough to wear an Old Avalonian tie. In Avalon horizons may be crystal clear, if you can put up with 40 m.p.h. winds to keep the atmosphere clean. The children pick my dandelions and then sell them to me for salads. Fishing villages like those of Cornwall can be tourist-free, if you don't mind slob-ice in the harbour for eight weeks a year and bathing a matter of high courage even on the hottest day. The greenest of lake-sides turns out to be a scrub-covered mass of sharp rocks when you start to fish from it. That inviting footpath is really a treacherous moose trail. In other words, nothing is quite what it seems, but it is fun if you can take it.

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The same thing may be said about politics in Avalon. The going is certainly tough, but it is full of interest. I had more than one "up-and-downer" with my old colleague the ex-premier of Newfoundland, Mr. Joseph R. Smallwood. One day I had succeeded in irritating him almost beyond endurance. "And what's more," he said, "you're no more than a second-rate politician. . . ." In his sense of the word, I am forced to admit he was right; his percipience was hardly surprising, since he is a supreme practitioner of the art.

I took to politics in total ignorance of what it involved, because I thought it my duty to do so. My smugness soon got its deserts. I passionately disliked life in the House of Commons, though I have greatly enjoyed the House of Lords. Party politics has been well described as the best of a bad lot of ways of running society, given the ordinary human imperfections of those who are prepared to do the job. But I see almost nothing from a party point of view. So I have to conform as an exercise in humility. My politician friends are almost all well motivated, as decent as the next man, and more honest than most (they have to be, for their lives are completely exposed). Moreover, many of them are both intelligent and wise. But the nature of the job, its tempo, its demands, and its immediacy do not encourage serious study and long-term thinking. When politicians make mistakes, it is usually because they have not done their homework or put on their thinking caps.

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Politics has been tritely defined as the science of compromise and the art of the possible. Such pragmatic definitions make little appeal to youth. Many a starry-eyed young man has entered politics with the improvement of society as his main conscious motive. It was reading Charles Hill's excellent review of Michael Foot's book on Aneurin Bevan in the *B.M.J.* last November that reminded me of a passionate discussion I had with Nye on this very subject; though with Nye all discussions tended to be passionate.

"Boy," he said, "the proposition you maintain that politics is primarily a method of large-scale philanthropy and God-like beneficence is manifest rubbish. The essence of politics is the pursuit of power. If you are not interested in the pursuit and exercise of power, if you are not prepared for the vicarious blows you will receive on the way, get out . . . I followed power from the urban district council to the county council, from the county council to parliament, from opposition to government, and from government to cabinet. And always I found power had slipped away around the next corner. . . ."

As a rider to Nye's views on power, Lord Beveridge once told me how in his experience power and influence varied inversely. When he had power, he was so busy holding on to it that he had no time to think about how to use it. It was when he was powerless that he planned the reshaping of our society.

Fortunately for medicine, Aneurin Bevan was a very atypical politician. Herbert Morrison was more stable and judicious. Clem Atlee was wiser and crisper. But Nye had the temperament of an artist. He alone was capable of seeing visions and dreaming dreams. His method of political research was simplicity itself. He liked the company of clever people. He would lead off with some outrageous statement, uttered with lucidity and dogmatism. He anticipated and got powerful and reasoned responses. Any solecism or weakness was pounced on with delight and great gusts of laughter. As the excitement grew, his finger wagged more and more and his stammer grew more pronounced. . . . Then, next morning, in a brilliant little address to the Association of Rodent Operatives, he would cast aside his prepared brief and enunciate with clarity and firmness the very views he had been so passionately attacking the night before. For Nye, life was a series of Roads to Damascus, and those of us who were at heart reformers rather than politicians found in him a powerful mediator and advocate, if only we could catch him at the right moment.

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It was by using this technique that we were able to defeat Herbert Morrison's plan (adopted by the Labour Party) for a universal municipalized hospital service. We were able to convince Nye that the right way to staff a national hospital service was with consultants arranged, as it were, in parallel rather than in a hierarchy. This was the secret of the success of the old voluntary hospitals, and the adoption of this system ensured the high quality of the inpatient care in the new N.H.S.

On privacy, Nye's pragmatism fought his equalitarianism. The victory of pragmatism was ensured by the *argumentum ad hominem*. "Suppose I am an enforced patient in a public ward," he cried, "what chance have I for that tranquility of mind which is essential to recovery? Half the ward will loathe me and half love me, and neither half will be backward in coming forward. The right to purchase privacy should be the privilege of us all." Of course, he was right. But at £100 a week, the privilege is certainly not universal. They manage these things better in Canada, where I got my private room for \$8 a day.

TAYLOR

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