

Thomas Burke on "Obedience to Instructions"



THE subject of perhaps the ablest speech ever made by Burke was the one above named. Gibbon, the well-known historian, then a member of Parliament, and a staunch Tory, writes as follows: "Never can I forget the delight with which that diffusive and ingenious orator, Mr. Burke, was heard, and even by those whose existence he proscribed." According to Hudson, the mighty speech, taken on the whole, may be safely pronounced the finest piece of parliamentary eloquence in the language, or perhaps in the world.

Which Interest Paramount?

Burke says that, when a man is chosen to represent a constituency, he should aim, with perseverance and tolerance, to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unlimited communication with his constituents. Their wishes, their opinions, their business, should have the first and last call on his time, his energies, his pleasures and his abilities. In a word, he should always be ready to sacrifice his own personal interests for those of his constituents.

Members should sacrifice personal interests for those of their people; but never should they, though the loss to them be irreparable, submit their unbiased opinions, their seasoned judgments, their dictates of conscience, to be sacrificed to the people. A member who will betray his own conscientious power of judgment to the rash mandates of an enraged populace, is no man to be trusted, and sooner or later he will betray his people. One betrayal leads to another, and it is the people who are generally the losers in the end. The public blindly imagine that a member should go to Parliament, literally bound hand and foot, to do, to speak, and to vote as their authoritative mandate orders him. No self-reliant or conscientious man will accept office as a member, with such conditions of restraint, with such machine-like instructions; and, as a result, honest, reliable and capable men shun politics. What naturally follows? Their places are quickly filled by irresponsible men, in an irresponsible manner. These men do not hesitate to make multitudinous election promises, and are never over-scrupulous about the fulfillment of them. As a consequence, the peevish and exacting constituency never receives even its just demands from any government, and their sitting member, as a rule, retains his seat for one session only.