

BURKE'S ELITIST VIEW OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

In his Bristol speech, at the end of the first election, Burke claims that he believes the representative should live in close and frank communication with their voters, that he should sacrifice his rest and his personal interests to theirs, but that he cannot abdicate the independence of his decisions. Autonomous opinion and the enlightened conscience of the parliamentarian should not be sacrificed to any group or individual, as sacrificing them to the opinion of voters would be to betray them instead of serving them¹.

Parliament being representative of the whole nation, a Member of Parliament is not merely the representative for the constituency who elected him. And, because Parliament is a place where the national interest is debated and which has the capacity to legislate in accordance with it, since the national interest cannot be reduced to the sum of the various local interests, the parliamentarian cannot rescind their own assessment of what the nation's interests are, placing it in the hands of their voters².

It will be through the discussion between different interests that the notion of the interest of the nation will emerge, very concrete, and which may gain substance in the adoption of the defence of an apparently individual interest that, in the circumstances, better represents the interest of the whole – as happened when Burke defended Ireland's commercial interests and Bristol voters felt threatened, Burke justified himself then by stating that defending free trade and protecting that freedom for Irish traders aligned with Bristol's interests, even though it did not seem evident to them at that time.

No individual interest can take precedence over the broader interest, because what is so conceived will not end up expressing an authentic individual interest, since what endangers the whole cannot truly serve the part, I quote:

“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 endeavour to give it effect”³ **end of quote**

The opinion of the voter, who does not have to take into account the interest of the entire nation, much less to impartially take into account opposing interests, should not compel his representative to obey his requests, because government is a matter of reason, not of will, I quote: “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”⁴ **end of quote**.

David Beetham believes that Burke does not claim for the parliamentarian a superior capacity for deliberation relative to the voters, as would happen in an elitist theory of representation. Beetham argues that Burke's statements only indicate that Burke understood that decisions should be made in the place where debate takes place and not far from the forum.⁵ However accurate, Beetham's argument does not seem to capture Burke's theory of representation in all its aspects: It is true that he understands that decisions must emerge from a discussion to be held in Parliament, but it is also true that Burke really supports a governing elite, subject to the control of voters at the polls, even though what primarily qualifies this elite is its morality and its knowledge and not just birth rights.

In 1769, in *"Observations on a Late Publication Intituled "The Present State of the Nation ""*, commenting on the suggestion made there that the number of voters should be increased, Burke says, I quote:

“What other reason can he have for suggesting, that we are not happy enough to enjoy a sufficient number of voters in England? I believe that most sober thinkers on this subject are rather of opinion, that our fault is on the other side; and that it would be more in the spirit of our constitution, and more agreeable to the pattern of our best laws, by lessening the number, to add to the weight and independency of our voters. And truly, considering the immense and dangerous charge of elections; the prostitute and daring venality, the corruption of manners, the idleness and profligacy of the lower sort of voters, no prudent man would propose to increase such an evil, if it be, as I fear it is, out of our power to administer to it any remedy”⁶ **end of quote**

Direct election was a necessity but minimizing the unwanted effects of this consultation was of the utmost prudence and this objective was achieved by decreasing the number of voters, thus granting each of them greater weight and independence. In *A Bill for Shortening the Duration of Parliaments*, when he addresses the evils inherent in popular elections, he states:

“To govern according to the sense and agreeably to the interests of the people is a great and glorious object of government. This object cannot be obtained but through the medium of popular election; and popular election is a mighty evil”⁷-end of quote

It would be hasty to conclude from these statements that Burke did not consider elections a good *per se*, after all, it is only through them that "the glorious objective" of governing according to the interests of the people is achieved, and his opinions about Wilke's case proves it. Rather, it must be understood that, as happens in Burke's assessment of other matters, popular elections are a good with an evil associated with them.

In fact, Burke recognizes that government action, in which parliamentarians participate, is a qualified action, which can only be performed by those who have the necessary skills, in accordance with the eminently rational nature of political action.

In *Speech on the Plan for Economical Reform* Burke defines the parliamentary task as, I quote:

“The people are the masters. They have only to express their wants at large and in gross. We are expert artists, we are the skilful workmen, to shape their desires into perfect form, and to fit the utensil to their use. They are the sufferers, they tell the symptoms of the complaint; but we know the exact seat of the disease, and how to apply the remedy according to the rules of art”-end of quote

Problems are presented by voters in an imprecise and vague way because they are not seen from the highest perspective, which characterizes the vision of the ruler. The ruler needs to have a deep and broad knowledge of reality in order to know how to apply the remedy to the origin of the evil; that is why he appears as the specialist in solving the problems that voters “suffer” – the use of this term illustrates the passive role that Burke assigns to the people in matters of governance.

The representatives are qualified to find solutions, because they are, I quote, the “philosophers in action” and they must solve the problems presented to them. According to the opinions of those who elected them? Perhaps, when it coincides with that of the parliamentarian himself. And because the parliamentarian's action is a rational one, it certainly does not coincide with the fleeting opinion that changes with the fashion of the day, but rather agrees with the opinion that they

would probably maintain five years from now, I quote: “I am to look, indeed, to your opinions, - but to such opinions as you and I must have five years hence” **end of quote**, that is, according to the result of the assessment of the situations and their possible evolution. An “opinion” that is a qualified opinion and more than a momentary inclination.

While advocating for the parliamentarian's independence from direct voter instructions, in the name of their true interests, he states, I quote:

“I knew that you chose me (...) to be a pillar of the state, and not a weathercock on the top of the edifice, exalted for my levity and versatility, and of no use but to indicate the shiftings of every fashionable gale ”.⁸**end of quote**

Finally, in a letter to the Duke of Portland in September 1780, he states, I quote:

“ I shall always follow the popular humor, and endeavor to lead it to right points, at any expense of private Interest, or party Interest (...) but as to leaving to the Crowd, to choose for me, what principles I ought to hold, or what Course I ought to pursue for their benefit - I had much rather (...) mix with them, with the utter ruin of all my hopes, (...) than to betray them by learning lessons from them ”.⁹**end of quote**

While Burke is elitist in terms of his view of those who have the ability to elect and those who have the ability to govern, it does not mean that Burke favours an aristocratic society protected against social mobility, but rather that he supports an ordained pyramidal society where mobility is the result of merit.

¹ Burke (1865), *SBCP, Works* II, p. 95.

² . Burke (1865), *SBCP, Works* II, p. 96.

³ . Burke (1865), *SBCP, Works* II, p. 96.

⁴ ”. Burke (1865), *SBCP, Works* II, p. 95.

⁵ Cf. David Beetham (2003), “Political Participation, Mass Protest and Representative Democracy”, p. 598.

⁶ . Burke (1865), *OPSN, Works* I, pp. 370-1.

⁷ Burke (1866), *SDP, Works* VII, p. 72.

⁸ Burke (1865), *SBPE, Works* II, p. 382.

⁹ Cf. Burke (1963), “Letter to the Duke of Portland”, 3 September 1780, *Correspondence* IV, p. 274.