**Fire and Ashes: Success and Failure in Politics**

Michael Ignatieff (Harvard University Press, 2013)

In *The Republic* Plato argues that the best form of government is a dictatorship by intellectuals. He thought that political problems, like scientific and moral problems, could be solved by the application of knowledge. Giving power to the cleverest citizens would be conducive to achieving the best outcomes for all citizens. Many philosophers have been tempted to believe that Plato was right; Michael Ignatieff succumbed to this temptation.

*Fire and Ashes* is Ignatieff’s account of the abandonment of his academic career at Harvard, his surprise entry into Canadian politics leading to his election as an MP in January 2006, his capture of the leadership of the Liberal Party, and his campaign against Stephen Harper, the incumbent Prime Minister, in the general election campaign of Spring 2011, in which he led his party to comprehensive defeat, losing his own seat in the process. It is the antithesis of that genre of books published by fêted business leaders upon their retirement, which seek to pass on their successful leadership tips for the benefit of future generations. Ignatieff's theme is failure, which he recounts with candour and (mostly) without bitterness.

*Fire and Ashes* tells us that the daily life of our political leaders is a hard life: never-ending travel, innumerable meetings, endless hand-shaking, dealing not only with the subterfuges of opponents but also with the betrayals of friends. While the anecdotes are interesting it is hard to conclude that politics in Canada is significantly worse than politics in other places, except that the weather is colder. The real surprise of the book is the revelation that Ignatieff appeared not to know what lay ahead when he embarked upon his political career: he taught politics, but politics he did not know.

He had been a political activist when a student, but he left Canada aged 21, first for the UK and subsequently for the US. Thirty-seven years later he returned to Canada to re-enter the political fray, having been abroad for the whole of his working life. Ignatieff tried to turn this weakness into a strength: “I would tell my story as a homecoming. It was one of the oldest ones in the book: the prodigal’s return. In the Bible, didn’t every one turn out to embrace him when he showed up on the dusty road?” (p.26).

If the Harvard professor had studied Luke’s account more closely he would have known that the prodigal is welcomed home by his indulgent father, but not by his jealous brother. The brother is furious that an expensive party has been thrown for the younger sibling who had previously abandoned his home and squandered his inheritance, while he, the elder son, had remained behind and worked dutifully for the family without reward.

In the most interesting section of the book, Ignatieff describes how Stephen Harper succeeded in denying him standing with the Canadian electorate. By “standing” he means the right to be heard within the political debate. A person with standing has a voice; you can challenge what they say but you cannot ignore them. A person without standing has no voice. As Ignatieff says: “Once you’ve denied people’s standing, you no longer have to rebut what they say. You only have to tarnish who they are” (p.133).

The poster campaigns run against him – “Michael Ignatieff. Just Visiting” and “Michael Ignatieff. He didn’t come back for you” – were effective. Ignatieff was not able to establish standing with the Canadian electorate. He was not able to convert his standing at Harvard into standing at Ottawa. He was easily tarnished; both because of his long absence from Canadian public life and because he seemed to think that this absence did not matter. Voters showed themselves to be more like the prodigal’s brother than the prodigal’s father.

*Fire and Ashes* is not about "success and failure in politics": it is only about failure. It is about the failure to distinguish knowledge of political ideas from the skill of doing actual politics. For all his expertise in political theory, Ignatieff failed to appreciate that he was, in truth, a political *ingénu*. It is also about the failure to distinguish his evident love of his country from the likelihood that his country would choose to reciprocate this love. Political standing is not an entitlement. It must be earned through time spent serving the people. Ignatieff did not spend enough of his time to earn the right to political standing in Canada.

The book's title *Fire and Ashes* might suggest a reference to the story of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and plunged to his death in the ocean. Perhaps Ovid's tragic tale of Phaethon's attempt to drive his father's sun-chariot across the sky suggests a more relevant lesson: never send a boy to do the work of the gods.

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May 2014