
Edmund Burke and Historical Precedent

According to Edmund Burke, knowledge of historical precedent can be a valuable tool in dealing with more current issues of a similar nature. He is a proponent of allowing policies and customs from the past to endure not only for the sake of tradition but also because customs that survive throughout generations are often successful for good reason. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* Burke implies that respect, knowledge and adherence to the past practices of successful nations should inform the politics of present governments.

In explaining the value of historical customs, Burke makes reference to the Revolution as a means to preserve historical rights that had become threatened: “The Revolution was made to preserve our ancient, indisputable laws and liberties and that ancient constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty.” With emphasis on the term ‘ancient’ Burke implies that such long-standing precedents transform what may have at one time been privilege into an inalienable right. Once a nation has adopted a particular practice as tradition, it becomes dear to the citizens and should not be disputed without just cause.

Burke insists that the Revolution, in spite of its title, was not meant to be revolutionary but rather preservative in nature for “the very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror.” It is clear then that Burke has deep respect for the traditions in France and wished to re-establish a government “as an inheritance from our forefathers.” This is not to say that modification to government was undesirable but rather any alteration to the policies of the nation should be made with profound understanding of the past. Burke makes this apparent when he states: “All the reformations we have hitherto made have proceeded upon the principle of reverence to antiquity...all those [reformations] which possibly may be made hereafter will be carefully formed upon analogical precedent, authority, and example.”

Burke is adamant in his belief that successful reformation to law can be more easily achieved through the consideration of well established rulings. In his support of this idea he cites the Magna Charta of King John as an extension or elaboration on the positive charter of Henry I. He explains the establishment of the Magna Charta as “nothing more than a reaffirmance of the still more ancient standing law of the kingdom.” If one accepts this statement as being true then one might understand the institution of such a charter as merely a formal way of ensuring those “most sacred rights and franchises as an inheritance.”

Burke feels the notion of ‘inheritance’ is important to understanding both the past as well as expectations for the present. He employs this concept of inheritance to explain or justify the amendment of the Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right as a demonstration of “entailed

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

inheritance derived to us from our forefathers.” He states that the value of such ‘inheritance’ goes beyond simple maintenance of the time-honored constitution but also serves to preserve a national unity. Burke feels that newer governmental policies are most successful and acceptable when they preserve fundamental inheritances: “We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors...This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection, or rather the happy effect of following nature.”

The idea of sustaining policy through ‘profound reflection’ or respect of past practices is one which Burke feels should be adhered to above all else. He compares this maintenance of traditional customs to ‘following nature’ which implies that the preservation of a country’s customs is essential to sustaining a natural state of civil order and consequently, one could assume, obedience. He states: “By a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and lives. The institutions of policy...are handed down to us, and from us, in the same course and order.”

Conversely, Burke is very critical of those who wish to revolutionize or transform state policy. Even if intentions are benevolent he believes that a “spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views.” In promoting this idea Burke is subtly critiquing those current governmental policies that were in place in France at the time *Reflections* was composed. Later in the same section Burke seems to address this issue directly when he states, “All your sophisters cannot produce anything better adapted to preserve a rational and manly freedom than the course that we have pursued.”

As far as Burke is concerned, the politics of the past inform the politics of the present in every conceivable way. When Burke says “people will not look forward with posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors,” he is essentially saying that governments that are unaware or indifferent of past practices are doomed to suffer mass discontent. Though state officials have the ability and in most scenarios, the right to amend and reform policy, they should be wary of historical precedent and utilize past experience as a framework to guide future directions.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)