Politics as a Profession for Businessmen

Address by

Hon. James A. Farley

before the

Wharton School of Finance
University of Pennsylvania
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ADDRESS

BY

HON. JAMES A. FARLEY

Mr. WAGNER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD an interesting and timely address delivered by Hon. James A. Farley before the Wharton School of Finance, University of Pennsylvania, at Philadelphia, Pa., December 4, 1939. The subject of the address is Politics as a Profession for Businessmen.

There being no objection, the address was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

It is a privilege for me to address the members of a great university which, among its other functions, maintains one of the best known schools of business in the world. I am particularly glad to talk to you quite frankly and simply about politics. One of the most useful things that any of us can do is to look occasionally at the other man's job. It would be very helpful if all politicians could look occasionally at business through a businessman's eyes, and if all businessmen could occasionally have a glimpse of public affairs through the eyes of politicians.

I am a politician, and am proud of being one. I am also a businessman, and I am proud of that. But I do think it is fair to say—though politicians frequently do not say it—that in politics we probably have to take account, and do take account, of the views of businessmen perhaps even more than businessmen take account of political factors.

Politicians probably stand more abuse year in and year out than perhaps any other group of individuals. And yet the success of our democracy in large measure is directly and continuously dependent on them and on their work. Public opinion in a democracy has to find some way of expressing itself in an orderly and effective fashion. This we do through political parties, which give effective form to the desires of the public and the views of our citizens. The organization of political parties and the using of them to express the public will is the work of politicians. It is they who must harmonize conflicting points of view; who must reach compromises; who must look always for the greatest common divisor of public opinion and give the result form and substance. In practice this means reaching agreements on candidates, on policies, and on legislation which meets the needs of the country.

One may almost say that whenever the politician fails, democracy fails. In some countries abroad, where politicians were unable to work out a general unity, when parties divided and subdivided to an intolerable degree, and when agreement could not be had on men and measures, the structure became so weakened that dictatorship was invoked as a relief from confusion.

The vices of the politician have so often been attacked that I think it is fair, for a change, to fire a shot in his defense. A well-known author once wrote a most elaborate study about politics and politicians, taking careful account of all their virtues and of all their failings; but he wound up with the conclusion that, after all, in the prevailing state of the world, politics was one of the noblest professions in the world. It did endeavor to create, maintain, and safeguard the public order, within which individuals everywhere could work out their own lives in peace and freedom.

Is politics a profession for businessmen? I think it can be, and should be, if certain facts are appreciated. Many of the qualities required for success in both callings are the same. At bottom, as usual, they turn on character. A businessman's greatest asset is his reputation for keeping his engagements; and the greatest asset of a politician is the knowledge that his word is 100 percent good.

A politician's promise is called by other politicians a "contract." It is frequently not the kind of contract that businessmen talk about—that is, an arrangement by which one man promises to do something in return for the promise of his opposite party to do something for him. More often than not in political matters it is a promise to try to work out some particular problem; or to take a particular position, and there is no consideration of any kind received for the promise. When in political life it is said of a man, "He keeps his contracts," he has achieved the first essential to success. This is exactly what a businessman has attained when the banker, his customers, and his competitiors all know that he is a man of his word.

Likewise, a politician, like a businessman, has to be extremely careful about giving his word. He has to try to estimate whether, when he gives his word, he can fulfill it. Men who are experienced in public life are very cautious about giving their word. They know that all kinds of considerations enter into the problem; and they know that it is much easier to promise than to make good. This is also the characteristic of a cautious and capable businessman.

A third requirement is certainly the same for success in both politics and business. This is the kindly quality of courtesy and generosity. There is temptation in both fields to say unkind things about other men or to belittle their motives;

yet experience teaches that lack of generosity, and willingness to take liberties with other men's reputations, eventually spoils the most promising career. The other man is entitled to his point of view, and nothing is gained by not recognizing that he is probably honest about it. Political battles, like business competition, are hard fought; but successful fighting does not descend to personalities. Where you hear of personal attacks in politics, you usually find that an amateur is back of them.

Again, in both fields, moderation and self-control are essential. To take undue advantage of a situation is always a mistake, if only because in the fast-moving panorama of human events, situations are apt to reverse themselves. Moderation in the hour of triumph rests on something more than mere self-preservation. It is essential to democratic government. If the successive political victories of various groups were followed in each case by an attempt to make trouble for the defeated party, democracy would soon break up in a set of meaningless rebellions. Politicians know, just as businessmen know, that if an advantage is pushed too far, eventually a day of reckoning comes.

But if the qualities needed for the profession of business and of politics are somewhat the same, it must be recognized that the profession of politics does require certain elements which businessmen frequently do not need to have. In public affairs men are never entirely their own masters, nor are they masters even over the particular situations in which they appear to be dominant. A businessman can, within limits, give an order. He can settle policy according to his own best lights. A politician has not only to make up his own mind as to what he thinks ought to be done, but he must also find out as well as he can what the public thinks or will think about a situation. In fact, his ability to estimate public opinion is one of the very reasons why he is able to mobilize that opinion so as to bring about some definite result.

Public opinion is not simple. It is made up of an endless number of strands. There are groups with special interests; and others with sentimental attachments; and still others with directly opposed interests; and all of these have to be considered. Frequently students, professors, or analysts are at work on advanced ideas in any particular situation; ideas which have not yet won public support, but which may do so in the future. All of these have to be taken together and appraised. Frequently the appraisal of them is instinctive; because good politics, like good business, is an art; and there is a genius of politics, just as there is a genius of business. Understanding and estimating currents of public opinion is not a thing which most businessmen have to do; and learning the art is sometimes not easy.

In public life I have often seen men come from business into public affairs. In some cases I have noticed that their first feelings are unhappy. They consider a problem, make up their own minds about it, and then go to work to get something done. This is what they would do in their own business. Suddenly they discover that a number of people do not agree, or that a great number of people who are only incidentally interested feel that they have a right to be consulted. The press somehow presents their ideas in an unhappy light.

To a man new in public life, the process seems interminable and cumbrous. Why in the world, they think, can you not make a straightforward decision and give quick answers to plain questions? Yet when action is taken without going through all of this troublesome process of consultation, consideration, and cooperation, the measure is often not successful. Things crop up which were not considered before. Units in the government whose existence is hardly suspected have to carry out the policy; and unless these units are sold on the idea, the results seem not too happy. Some men never do learn the process.

But there are others, and many of them, who do realize the difference in the two processes. Among them have been some of the most successful of public servants, outstanding in political life. In every case, I think, you would find that these men had learned not only to make up their own minds, but to consider that the public business means also meeting the minds of all kinds and sorts of people, and considering the interests of many and varied groups. These men have usually learned that ambition is just as legitimate a human motive as is the desire to make a profit—provided it is used moderately, and provided the means of attaining the ambition, like the methods used in making a profit, are honorable.

Ambition is to politics very much what the profit motive is to business. It is right and just that it should be so. As a legitimate profit ought to rest on a legitimate service rendered, so ambition to rise in the public service is worthy when it is satisfied by the faithful performance of useful work. In a very large measure political ambitions are satisfied by cooperation rather than by competition; I myself have found that the best method of working with many men is to try to help as many of them as possible to satisfy their legitimate ambitions, as an honest reward for work in the public interest.

A business grows more complex as it gets larger, and political problems grow more difficult as they cease to be local and become national. In this respect I believe the United States is peculiar. It is the largest group of people anywhere on earth which endeavors, through political processes, to work

out measures suitable to 130,000,000 people spread over a huge empire. Though conflicting interests have to be considered even in the smallest local district, they are as nothing compared to the conflicting interests in national matters.

Yet our economic success is due directly to the fact that we have been successful in finding common measures suitable, at least in part, to all; for otherwise, instead of having one republic, we should long since have been cut up into regional units each endeavoring to take advantage of the other; and we should probably be headed toward the tragic chaos in which the continent of Europe finds itself today. That we were able to escape this is not merely good fortune. It was due, first, to the singular clear-sightedness of the men who drew the Constitution of the United States specifically in order to form a more perfect union. But it was also due to the fact that American politicians, whatever their sins, in general have realized that their task is to make the machinery work, and not to find ways by which it can be made to fail.

Let me say a word about a phrase which is often heard in these days. People ask for "more business in government." There is a great deal of truth in this, but only if some of the limitations I have tried to note above are kept in mind. The methods of government can certainly be improved. We are a long way from that smooth, clean-cut efficiency in public affairs which all of us hope to see. But when that is said, it nevertheless is true that government is a great deal more efficient than many people suppose. Do you know anything, for instance, on which you can depend with greater certainty than you can on the United States Post Office? Year in and year out, I think any fair-minded person would agree that it is as dependable and effective as any other business.

Even the process of legislation, I think, stands up pretty well by comparison. It is true that there are endless delays and compromises and modifications in order to work out a measure which will finally have the general support of the people. But if you have ever tried to secure agreement on a measure in, let us say, a trade association representing a large number of businessmen, I think you will agree that the process is almost as difficult as in a legislature. In trade associations or other conventions, there are endless modifications and delays; discussion is easy, but action difficult. What is more, you will find that in the trade association, as well as in the State legislature or in the Congress, if action is hasty, if there is not this full discussion, the job is apt to be badly done.

Businessmen sometimes complain of this, thinking of their own desks where they can make decisions by themselves. And yet even there, I think, a wise businessman knows that though he seems to decide the question by himself, in reality he does a good deal of consulting first. He consults his technical

people and his plant managers. Frequently he consults the representatives of his labor as well, and the decision he finally takes is a composite of all their views. Unless he does this, his business decision is likely to have disappointing results. When it is remembered that even a small task in government is huge compared to most tasks in business, you begin to discover that there is a reason for this apparent slowness and delay.

I believe that there is a great opportunity in public service for businessmen. The certainty of the business method, the search for the thing that can be done instead of for the impractical idea, the insistence that the customer shall be satisfied—all are qualities of the highest use in public affairs. But to these must be added a certain sensitive quality—the ability to understand public opinion; the willingness to compose differences; the realization that in politics no one can act alone, whether the affair concerns the fifth precinct of the sixth ward or the national interest of the United States. I do not hold out any hope of great material reward, nor even of great reputation, as an incentive. Frequently the only reward a politician ever has is the feeling that a great many people are happier because of his labor, and the friendship of the men with whom he has worked. Often he works unseen; still more often he is viciously attacked. Occasionally the fortunes of the game, the loyalty of his friends, and the triumph of his ideas will carry him to great heights.

Politicians, like businessmen, can go wrong; too often they do. But in the main the politician carries on the fabric of American political life, and it is today the most successful government in the world. He parallels the businessman who carries on the fabric of our economic life, which likewise is today the most effective economic organization in the world. Our country has made good use of both; it has every reason to be proud of both. It has every reason to demand of both groups that we improve our methods and enlarge our ideas. But it has every cause to believe that if the two professions understand their own tasks and understand each other our democracy is well served and our country is safe.

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