

Public Choice, Politics and Politicians

Everyone seems caught up in the febrile environment thrown by the machinations of next year's election. Politicians, and unfortunately the electorate, are preoccupied with our brand of realpolitik birthed on the axes of religion, ethnicity, region. They serve as a smokescreen behind which notions of politics that should be the defining characteristics of politicians, and who should be adjudged by ability to deliver the public good, gets forgotten.

As things stand, a good number of our contemporary politicians appear to have gotten up and declared themselves to be a politician or a candidate for an elected position without having to present any clear political position that they intend to pursue or any leaning to ideological notion tied to a political party. And certainly, these modern-day politicians do not exhibit any inclination to deliver the common good. In a twist of Descartes' "cogito, ergo sum", our current politicians seem to have emerged solely on the basis of the pronouncement: "I know I am a politician therefore I am one." If such is the quintessence of politicians, then how can there ever be accountability, as the politician would only be accountable to himself as he and he alone has defined what he is. Moreover, what does this spell for a society structuring itself on democracy, let alone for the improvement of lives of citizens by delivering superior common good? It is not difficult to see that such a system of politics is incompatible with a 'civil service' given that the latter, if only by name, is meant to serve civil society.

Where the definition of politician is devoid of politics or ideals it undermines the ability to deliver the public good. And since politicians are accepted as such, reinforced by their twisted Cartesian definition, they are free to pursue their own commercial interests at the expense of public interest. The name politician is, in our current politics, simply eponymous with businessman. The political establishment differs in this regard from the business establishment only by degree. In such a situation, there is no polity, just business-as-polity.

Effort and reward are coterminous. Seeking to maximise personal reward or remuneration relative to effort, sadly, seem to have become a major national preoccupation, and is not lost on politicians. Knowing where the reward, the commonwealth and natural resources are domiciled, makes it easy for our mercantilist politicians to pursue their objective. Based on their uncontested self-definition and identification, and the general sense of entitlement, namely that such reward is due to them as politicians, corruption becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. As long as the political establishment is allowed to set its own rules, and those rules include rewarding itself with unbridled access to our commonwealth and natural

resources, the citizens should not complain or cry. Unless that is they are prevented from voting.

Two observations can be made as regards expecting politicians to deliver in the public interest, for the common good: One is causative, the other is sequential. Politicians of their own volition cannot be left alone to deliver public interest. Politicians must be compelled to deliver on behalf of the common good. In other words, the delivery of the common good must be defined as the purpose of politics before the engagement of politicians on the public stage. It follows that the sequence for delivery of the common good cannot be left to politicians to define. If it is taken as given that what is good for and desired by the people is known and properly defined *ab initio*, then the politician must come up with a list of measurable actions he or she suggests he will take to deliver what the public require. This would make for a meaningful scenario for the people to choose politicians who can deliver for the sake of the common good, meaning to improve the nation's welfare, and enhance general living conditions.

Thus, it is incumbent on the electorate to define and articulate the public or common good, politics and politicians, in that order. The self-serving definition of politicians that subsumes politics to personal interest and ignores the public interest can only warp and stunt the deepening of democracy and development, respectively.

This broaches three questions that need to be asked in the context of the current challenges Nigeria faces: What is public interest? How should it be defined? How best can it be delivered? Finding the right answers to these questions, in that order, is crucial if the political space characterised by 'misalignments' is to be sanitised and create a functioning polity. The alternative is to leave the political establishment to conduct business as usual, meaning pursuit of own business and interest.

We do not have the space here to provide anything like exhaustive answers to these questions. And can only point in the direction of where such answers might be found. In a democratic system, the first question need not be answered in terms of what is 'best for the majority' but could be answered in terms of 'providing equal opportunities for all'. The second question intimates that it is the public who must define what they feel is in the country's interest rather than abandoning this to a sub-set (current politicians). The third question brings governance through political agents and institutions into focus. The use of 'best' as an adverb points to the inclusion of other criteria such as accountability, fiduciary responsibility, sustainability, transgenerational policies, inclusive economic growth, development, etc.

Over the last 60 years, politicians have at various times had an opportunity to offer answers. In the early days after Independence, the answers often drew on Western ideologies. When these were tainted, and their validity called into question after the incursion of military into governance, ideologies were abandoned in favour of expediency and pragmatism. With the way the current democratic dispensation is shaping up, is it reasonable or justifiable to expect the contemporary politicians to sort this out on their own? How deeply is the political establishment now a self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating system as to render it politically vacuous as regards the common good? If it is, who should be responsible for establishing a political system that prioritizes the 'common good' over all else? What measures are required?

One could, however, approach the question the other way round, namely not from the point of view of the political establishment, but from that of the electorate who are purportedly offered a choice. In a democratic dispensation, by definition, one votes for the politician whom one feels will best represent one's own interests. The underlying assumption is that one's own interests are best promoted by the nation's interests being furthered. In other words, one votes for a 'representative' of those interests.

However, if politicians do not heed any need to represent anything other than themselves, then over and above all those whose votes do not count, it is only rational if large swathes of the electorate choose not to vote. Any vote cast merely contributes to cosmetically cover up a farce of public choice, one in which the key pretence is that the politician in question intends to 'represent' interests other than his own. Imagine the following scenario: There is a general election, and no one turns out to vote simply because the candidates in question although have declared themselves to be politicians but failed to state clearly and convincingly how they will represent the interests of those who vote for them. (Making grandiose promises that serious analysts tell you cannot ever be redeemed. It is a moot point whether a system of politics where less than 14% of the populace ever votes, and therefore 8% spells a majority, can ever be considered a democracy. Our constitution declares that the presidential candidate who wins the election is the one who scores a certain proportion of the votes - that number is in no way connected to the actual number of votes cast compared to the number of persons eligible to vote. A constitutional provision that set a minimum quorum (and one well beyond the pocket of even extremely wealthy politicians) would already start to alter the balance in favour of a real public choice.