

The Danger of the Cult of Personality in Politics

The attractive and highly popular British actor 82 year old Michael Caine, who rose from a working class background in the London slums to act and star in 115 films, mostly portraying characters who spoke with a cockney accent, has now joined the growing number of current celebrities who have informed the citizenry of their views on public affairs and political individuals. He told us that he favors British exit from the European Union. The U.K., he argued, "cannot be dictated to by thousand of faceless civil servants in Brussels."

Caine is very able and was obviously knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2000 for his dramatic success. However, neither she nor anyone else can view him as one of the world's experts on international affairs in general or on the European Union in particular. His argument on the latter issue is based on a simple proposition: we buy more from them than they buy from us.

Caine's statement is not likely to have any substantial influence on Prime Minister David Cameron or on governmental and political decisions on the thorny, disputed questions pertinent to British relationship with the EU: whether the EU should be a single state with its own currency and constitution or a related group of sovereign nations, and whether freedom of movement between European nations is an unqualified principle.

However, Caine's pronouncement does bring up the issue of the interconnection of celebrities, including some present candidates for the US presidency, and politics in public life, and the existence of political theater, a phenomenon that has existed in various forms for more than two thousand years.

Stendhal in his novel, *La Chartreuse de Parme* quipped that politics in a literary work is like a gun shot in the middle of a concert, something vulgar, but nevertheless something impossible to ignore. But one can't ignore the fact that politics, if sometimes vulgar, has been an integral aspect of part of the Western theatre tradition. It has been present from Greek dramas such as those by Aristophanes, in so many of Shakespeare's plays, in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, to Arthur Miller in the recent past and David Hare today.

Frequently, dramatists have commented directly or indirectly on the controversies of the times, usually expressing discontent with the conditions of their society and the inadequacy of political leaders. In what is now a cliché, they believe they are speaking truth to power.

In their turn, politicians, democratic ones as well as demagogues such as Mussolini, Hitler or Huey Long, utilize political theater, theatrical rhetoric, gestures and devices to appeal to and persuade audiences of their views. The 2016 U.S. presidential candidates in their debates illustrate theater in action among politicians.

Politics is not yet show business but the two are frequently interrelated. Simulating performers who appeal to popular taste and culture, British Prime Minister Tony Blair played the electric guitar, and presidential candidate Bill Clinton played the tenor saxophone on television. Whether they pretend to be rock stars or not, politicians pay perhaps excessive attention to image and appearance, as well as use celebrities to bolster their support. Presidents and other political leaders often pose for photographs to themselves with celebrities as a way to capture attention and advance their cause.

If politicians impersonate actors, and use celebrities to induce support, the more serious problem today is the

possibility come that celebrities may want to be politicians or to use their popularity to make political statements or influence public opinion on issues about which they are not always adequately informed.

Celebrities come from different fields, but the cult of personality seems strongest among those in the entertainment industry. Few will approve of John Lennon's boast that "we (the Beatles) are more popular than Jesus now," but there are many personalities whose fame from their appearances in movies, television, and other forms of modern entertainment, has given them household name recognition. A increasing number take advantage of that visibility to issue political statements of various kinds.

A few celebrities from the entertainment world, Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura, have become politicians, if not all have achieved political success. Many others want to be taken seriously as political commentators or to be regarded as representatives of popular opinion. Sonny Bono must have been pleased with himself discussing the issue of world debt with President George Bush, French President Chirac, and the Pope, but his musical expertise was hardly relevant to a serious discussion of the issue with world leaders.

We are familiar with the actions of entertainment personalities who declare their allegiance to a political person, a party, or policy. On one side is Barbra Streisand speaking of "Lovely Democratic Memories of the way we were." On the other side, we have Loretta Lynn who tells us that Donald Trump is the only one who's going to turn this country around.

For a number of years, well known people in the entertainment and the literary field, such as Emma Thompson. Mark Rylance, Penelope Cruz, Alice Walker, and Elvis Costello, though totally uninformed of Middle East affairs in Syria, Iraq,

Lebanon, and Iran, have made statements strongly critical of the State of Israel, some even accusing it of being an “apartheid” state, or calling for a boycott of its goods, services and even academics. .

It is dangerous for a political regime or political decisions to be based on or to be the result of the influence of celebrities who claim to speak on behalf of The People. At best, most have only superficial knowledge of the issues involved and therefore lack the ability to make informed judgments on the matters at hand, which they often trivialize. The cult of personality tends to encourage style over substance, and to change the criteria on which decisions are made. Furthermore, in spite of their claims, celebrities are rarely in touch with popular sentiment. Nor do they speak as representatives of public opinion.

Michael Caine, Jane Fonda, Sean Penn, and others in show business, of course, have a full right to press an opinion or to bestow support on a particular cause, as can any citizen. But they have no right to expect any respect any deference as informed commentators on public affairs. Nor should the general public heed their assertions rather than ponder and evaluate the opinions of those who are more skilled and informed about serious political questions. That is what democratic representative government is all about.