

## Jaime Balmes: Seven Lessons and Three Pieces of Advice for Today’s Politicians\*

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Throughout the years, many authors have distilled different economic, political, legal, and moral aspects of Father Jaime Balmes’s thought. But we would do little justice to Balmes’s thinking if we were not to stress also his ideas’ continued relevance in our own day. Let us therefore open the time capsule and see what treasured lessons and advice Balmes has for our politicians—particularly those in the making.

### **Principles and Values**

Government should appeal to the great principles of society, Balmes wrote, “those principles which are not of any one school, which are not new but old as the world itself, existing from eternity in the paradigm of all perfection, communicated to societies like a breath of life.... *Reason, justice, good faith*: these are the words that government must write upon its flag.” Scholasticism shines through here. Spanish historian Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo said that Don Jaime memorialized St. Thomas’s *Summa*.<sup>1</sup> Balmes’s theses on the origin of civil power, its attributes and limits, as well as his defense of the right of resistance to tyrannical governments, come from members of the Salamanca School such as Francisco Suárez; these scholastics laid the foundations of classical liberalism. Following Aquinas, Balmes insists on the need for legitimate power to be subject to law, and for law to be subject to reason. As if he were analyzing the crisis we face in Catalonia today, he also warns that transgressing (constitutional) norms involves “habituating peoples and governments to disrespect laws; it establishes habits

of purely discretionary rule and forced obedience; this is tantamount to assuring that the country will continuously live with despotism or anarchy.” He concludes, “[T]o make it a principle that society is to be ruled by the will of man and not by the law is to establish a maxim from which tyranny is necessarily born.”<sup>2</sup>

## Pragmatism

In order to strive for the common good, Balmes explains, government and law should likewise be tied to reality, to actual human beings’ actions and interactions within a society. For instance, in the case of the Catalan nationalist crisis of identity, which he predicted, Balmes sought a pragmatic solution. He was conciliatory while being clear about the facts—a good lesson for today’s politicians: “Without dreaming of absurd independence projects . . . without losing sight of the fact that the Catalonians are Spanish too, and that a very prominent part of the nation’s prosperity or misfortunes must necessarily be theirs; without giving ourselves up to vain illusions that it is possible to break the national unity begun in the reign of the Catholic Monarchs. . . . Catalonia can nourish and foster a certain legitimate provincialism—prudent, judicious and compatible with the nation’s broader interests.”<sup>3</sup>

## Consistency

In order to avoid abuses of reason and intellectual smugness, Balmes sought to ensure that theoretical principles are applicable in practice. In his definition of politics as the art of the practicable he anticipates Spanish statesman Antonio Cánovas del Castillo (1828–1897), and in his “epistemological humility” he anticipates the thinking of F. A. Hayek (1899–1992) and Karl Popper (1902–1994). Political ideas, discourses, and deeds need to form a strong continuum if the objective is the common good. Thus, he criticizes political parties’ double standards and lack of consistency. Saying one thing and doing the other is taking voters for fools and undermining trust and cohesion. We can find numerous examples of this kind of contradictory and erratic behavior in today’s politics, particularly on the left. It is well-known, for instance, how the harshest critics of capitalism are often those who most enjoy a luxurious lifestyle.

## Truth

Balmes tried to build bridges between Spanish moderate liberals and traditionalists after Spain's bloody civil war (1833–1840). To do so, he stressed the importance of truth as a compass of all action and therefore recommended “considering all the facts, all the circumstances, both adverse and favorable” to find the best solutions to any political problem. His pragmatic approach does not lead him to utilitarianism. On the contrary, he insists on the active role that principles, morality, and tradition should play in politics. At the same time, he believes in human progress and looks with hope to the development of science, without falling into utopianism or determinism. In a nutshell, Balmes is principled without being dogmatic, which helps him reconcile different political positions into an innovative intellectual synthesis—an unequivocal sign of a freedom-loving thinker.

## Prudence

Balmes's conciliatory approach does not stop him from being a harsh critic of changes and revolutions “with no discussion of a gradation that could influence ideas and behavior,” and no connection to social reality—mere fruits of pressure and influence from arrogant minorities that think they know better than anyone else what is best for the majority of citizens. Such a critique is as valid in nineteenth-century Spain as it is in Western countries today. We *demand* immediate “big-bang” social and political changes, and dismiss incremental, well-thought-out, and trial-and-error approaches—a suicidal trend that completely disregards human nature. Balmes does not oppose change, but he does lay down some conditions:

In every age, it is necessary that the men who are to direct society understand the nature of the spirit that animates it and what its tendencies are; and rather than recklessly insisting on fighting with the nature of things, they should try to remedy what is bad in them, and use and foster the good they hold. Everything should be done with slow and gentle action, proper to the age in which they live, always giving a wide berth to one of the principal agents in the formation of great works: time.<sup>4</sup>

Edmund Burke could not have said it better.

## Institutions

Balmes considered institutions a key element of a society's stability. They are wisdom poured forth throughout generations, fertile soil for an ordered prosperity for the common good. Nevertheless, he has us consider the classic dilemma of government of laws versus government of men from another point of view, since "there are times and circumstances when the institutions themselves guide men; but there are also times and circumstances in which men have to guide the institutions. This is the case after a revolution, for then the institutions are too weak."<sup>5</sup> From a contemporary classical liberal perspective, such as that of Europe today, this could sound anachronistic. But let us think now of the institutions and serious crises that certain developing countries face, and questions will start to arise. Balmes does not purport to justify absolutisms or dictatorships—throughout his political writings he insists on the need to adapt to new times, on the importance of civil versus military power, and on the role of Parliament (*Cortes*), among other institutions. What he advocates is that the best people lead in difficult times (a certain elitism) and that "frank, calm and amicable communication be established between government and peoples" so that there will be order, since "without order there is no obedience to the laws, and without obedience to the laws there is no freedom."<sup>6</sup>

## Private Property

Balmes gives special attention to another fundamental institution of open societies: the right to private property. For example, regarding the *Cortes* voting on taxes—that is, Parliament exerting control over the financial pressure the government puts on citizens—he notes that "it is one of the best guarantees of peoples' prosperity, and a healthy check on envy, prodigality, and the wastefulness of bad governments." He adds that "one of the most beautiful hallmarks of European society was that even from its birth it tended to guard against government appropriation of citizens' property."<sup>7</sup> This raises at least two questions: First, do legislatures still protect our pockets? Second, are citizens' interests truly well-defended when their representatives negotiate debt ceilings, tax increases, and the national budget, or are particular interests placed before the general interest?

## Conclusion

As we commemorate the 170th anniversary of Father Jaime Balmes's death, let us in conclusion add three pieces of advice to these seven lessons given to politicians. First, be *open and conciliatory*: "Take the initiative and propose and implement, when possible, all the good that may exist in the opponents' system [of thought]." Second, be *optimistic*: "Why can't great and splendid days be in store for our homeland? Why can't streams of light and life arise from the very blow that we bewail? So let us not fall into discouragement, or give ourselves up to excessive confidence." And third, be *hard-working*: "For all great triumphs, there is a necessary condition that no man can refuse: work. May good ideas depend little on government support; may they depend much on your own strength."<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

- \* On behalf of Red Floridablanca, I would like to thank the Acton Institute for translating and publishing this series of articles, which I had the honor to coordinate, to commemorate the 170th anniversary of the death of Father Jaime Balmes (1810–1848).
- 1. Marcelino Menendez Pelayo, *Historia de los Heterodoxos Españoles*, vol. 2 (1880), 964, [http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/historia-de-los-heterodoxos-espanoles/html/fee78e52-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064\\_92.html](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/historia-de-los-heterodoxos-espanoles/html/fee78e52-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_92.html).
- 2. Jaime Balmes, *Escritos Políticos* (A collection of eight articles published in *El Pensamiento de la Nación*, nos. 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23 [ed. 1844]). Cited in Jaime Balmes, *Política y Constitución*, ed. Joaquín Varela Suanzes (Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1988), 215–16.
- 3. Joaquín Varela Suanzes, "Estudio Preliminar," in Balmes, *Política y Constitución*, ed. Varela Suanzes, xlvi–xlix.
- 4. Balmes, *Política y Constitución*, 268.
- 5. Balmes, *Política y Constitución*, 53.
- 6. Balmes, *Política y Constitución*, 96.
- 7. Balmes, *Política y Constitución*, 144.
- 8. Balmes, *Política y Constitución*, 316–17.