

Ignatieff, M. (2013). *Fire and Ashes. Success and Failure in Politics*. Cambridge (Massachusetts) – London (England): Harvard University Press, pp. 205.

At the beginning it has to be stressed that it is not at all common for an insightful, experienced and renowned observer of politics to decide to take a risky leap in order to begin a new life in the world of real politics (in this particular case Canadian). And yet in 2004 Michael Ignatieff (his academic curriculum vitae includes teaching and researching spells at the University of British Columbia, Cambridge University, University of Oxford, London School of Economics, Harvard University and University of Toronto; among his numerous publications, one can mention for example *Blood and Belonging. Journeys into the New Nationalism* [1993], *Isaiah Berlin. A Life* [1998] or *Empire Lite. Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* [2003]) did exactly that. He gave up the role of a detached – by that time he was living in America – and safe spectator and became a full-time politician (in his interview with Aaron Wherry from Maclean's weekly news magazine he described that transformation in a very Canadian way: "I came back [to Canada – S.B.] because I thought I could do something useful. I could stop being a spectator in the stands and put on my skates and get on the ice"). Within two years he was elected to the House of Commons from Etobicoke-Lakeshore electoral district in Ontario province. Soon after that he began his first, unsuccessful bid for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada. Later, after Stéphane Dion's resignation, he was first an interim – and then finally (2009) full-time elected leader of that party. His career in politics ended abruptly after the 2011 federal election, in which his party has lost the status of the Official Opposition and Ignatieff himself failed to be re-elected in his district.

The book under review here describes – in Ignatieff's words – "(...) the story of a brutal initiation, followed by a climb to the summit of politics in the largest democracy by physical size in the world" (p. 3). As we already know, ultimately that strenuous climb towards the summit of Canadian politics ended in a failure. However, thanks to the author's impressive intellectual capacities that failure had metamorphosed into an extraordinary book trying to grasp "politics as

a vocation" and politics "as a way of life" in the original form of "analytical memoir" (p. 3). It is also important to note its title: *Fire and Ashes. Success and Failure in Politics*. It is Ignatieff's idea to make his experience in politics as accessible as possible, because in spite of his particular failure, he is convinced that politics is important. Hence the remarks he offers should serve mainly as an educational tool and, if possible, inform people who are considering entering politics (especially young people) how to avoid the pitfalls which contributed to the author's ultimate downfall.

So what lessons about politics can we learn from Ignatieff's treatise? In the final part of his work entitled "The Calling" he is proposing a concise explanation of what politics should be. At the same time, it is a passionate defence and praise of politics as even after a bitter defeat Ignatieff perceives it as a noble and definitely necessary occupation ("The nobility lies in the battle to defend what you believe and mobilize others in the fight to preserve what is best about our common life as a people," p. 177). First of all in his opinion politics certainly is a careful balancing act because a successful politician must be able to find an equilibrium between things that have to be changed and things that have to be preserved (hence politics is never about total destruction and then starting from scratch). Politics is also about courage: if a politician is too cautious then such a person will not be able to grasp the opportunity to introduce the changes which were mentioned before. Politics is about knowing who a given politician is representing. There is no serious politics without hundreds of personal meetings with potential voters. It is about finding a narrative too: the people must be able to see the expression of their own dreams and aspirations in a credo of a given politician ("The story you need to tell is how to strengthen the common life, how to stand together against the forces of inequality, envy, division and hatred that are ceaselessly pulling our societies apart, and how to defend the eternal proposition of all progressive politics: that we must share our fate and live in justice with each other," p. 179). For Ignatieff politics is also associated with a great deal of respect: for the people (e.g., a governing politician cannot forget about those who voted for other candidates), for the opponents (never enemies!) and for the democratic institutions (in today's chaotic world when democracy has lost a lot of its charm and is being attacked from almost every

quarter, every liberal politician has to take on the role of being its custodian). Even the above sample could serve as long-lasting food for thought, inspiring hours of discussions.

And of course it is just a beginning, as in the earlier parts Ignatieff offers insightful observations regarding the role of one's family in politics (he focuses in that respect mostly upon a certain political legacy bequeathed upon us by our ancestors; on the other hand probably the most important background character in the book is Ignatieff's wife Zsuzsanna Zsohar); friendship in politics (it is quite heartbreaking to see how politics basically destroyed Ignatieff's friendship with Bob Rae), Canadian identity and multiculturalism (the brilliant concept of the "spine of citizenship" could definitely work outside of Canada's borders too, just like the catchphrase "Tous ensemble!"; there is also an important lesson of dealing with complicated international problems in the context of multicultural societies, as at times internal politics in such societies is closely related to the events abroad), contemporary parliamentarism in liberal democracies (it could be described as being too partisan, overshadowed by the executive and as a consequence not deliberative enough), money in politics (Ignatieff is definitely against the American model in which money too often determines the outcome of elections; he is also vehemently opposed to the so called permanent campaigning, especially because it is often limited to – as he calls it – drive-by smears) or standing (politics should never be consumed solely by the battle for standing; as Ignatieff says: "In a healthy democracy you would not question an adversary's right to be in the ring, or that person's citizenship, patriotic attachment, motives or good faith," p. 133). This book is also a kind of a constant dialogue with the classics of the theory of politics (e.g. Baldassare Castiglione, Niccolò Machiavelli, Max Weber).

In the opinion of the present reviewer Michael Ignatieff has written a truly wonderful book brimming with engaging ideas through and through. It is refreshing reading too as it is not just another title in the long list of laments for democracy. Instead we are being invited to seriously think about it. Obviously, democracy has some substantial deficiencies but the author wants us to work towards their elimination instead of letting ourselves to be trapped in the vicious circle of futile despairing. Finally, this book should be carefully read and discussed by every student of politics. Ignatieff is right: it is probably

young people who can use the ashes of his experience in the most creative and promising way. Maybe the fruits of their potential future involvement in politics are going to be as beautiful as the roses in his garden (p. 3).

Sergiusz Bober
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow
Institute of Political Science