

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY MONDAY 8TH APRIL 2019

Good morning.

The first Chancellor of Germany, Otto Von Bismarck, coined the aphorism: 'politics is the art of the possible'. Rab Butler, one time Chancellor of the Exchequer, took it as the title of his autobiography. Three times he nearly became Prime Minister, pipped at the post first by Anthony Eden then by Harold Macmillan and lastly by Alec Douglas Hume. According to Roy Jenkins, another formidable politician, he lacked 'a vast vanity'! But he was a successful Chancellor in the very difficult post-war period which is where he applied the art of the possible.

'Possible', it seems to me, lies somewhere between idealism and pragmatism. It's a more positive word than 'compromise'. And language means a lot in the present feverish atmosphere, as police chiefs warned last week.

To say you'll 'compromise' can be seen as contradicting yourself for no longer standing by what you promised. Looking for what's 'possible', on the other hand, speaks of being creative and going beyond the boundaries, even at your own personal cost. But above all 'possible' means 'do-able'.

And the primary political task this week for our Prime Minister and the present Chancellor of Germany together with the 26 other European leaders is to find what is do-able.

On the day that Winston Churchill retired Rab Butler wrote to him. In spite of Churchill telling him 'there are no friends at the top' in politics the terms in which he wrote were endearing.

"I myself feel heavy and sad with the responsibility ... bequeathed (to me) .. because of the times that lie ahead".

Then he made reference to St Augustine.

“Let nothing disturb thee, let nothing affright thee, all passeth away, God alone will stay, Patience obtaineth all things. This is what I, like St Augustine, have learned”, observed Butler.

Patience and the art of the possible framed his political vision.

Of course, patience consumes time and the art of the possible calls for pliability.

Butler then reflected on the rest of his distinguished career after his chancellorship.

“It was never again said of me, or for that matter of the British economy either, that we had ‘la puissance d’une idee en marche’, the power of an idea on the move.

In our present context, the ‘idea’ now before us is that ratification of the Referendum by the vast majority of Parliament.

As politicians here and in the rest of Europe reflect on the power of this idea, all eyes will be upon them to see if they prove to be - artists of the possible.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE