

22nd April 2022

Liars

**“And, after all, what is a lie? ‘Tis but
The truth in masquerade.”**

Lord Byron, Don Juan

Frederick Douglass was an American abolitionist, women’s rights advocate and statesman during the American Civil War. Born a slave in Maryland, he wrote in his treaty on Civil Rights, *Our Composite Nationality*, in 1869:

It is objected to ... that he is secretive and treacherous, and will not tell the truth when he thinks it for his interest to tell a lie ... If he will not tell the truth, except when it is for his interest to do so, let us make it for his interest to tell the truth ... [Human]kind are not held together by lies. Trust is the foundation of society. Where there is no truth, there can be no trust, and where there is no trust, there can be no society. Where there is society, there is trust, and where there is trust, there is something upon which it is supported.

What has changed in a century and a half in American and UK politics? Little, I believe, to call into question Douglass’ assertions, but much, I fear, in the out-working of the principles which were enshrined in his arguments. When “the truth in masquerade” is offered as a weapon for self-preservation, or puts Party and power before integrity and honesty, then the fundamental pillars on which a stable society is built are seriously undermined. Truth and trust are severely threatened by lies.

It is a long-standing convention in debates in the House of Commons, the lower house in the UK parliament, that an “honourable” gentleman or lady should not be called a liar. Someone can be called “a stranger to the truth”. But they must *never* be called a liar. It comes from the days where honour was everything. That’s also why, in the adversarial lay-out of the House, the government and opposition benches are two sword-lengths apart. But when an “honourable member” is more than two sword-lengths from the truth, when honour and honesty are no longer the driving forces of service and representation, what then?

Let us all make it “for the interest” of those who represent us to tell the truth. And when they do not, let us not be afraid to call them out as liars. For if the “truth in masquerade” becomes commonplace, we all suffer the consequences.

A prayer for today

Lord, you are the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let my life be true to your Way. Amen

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