From the Editor

‘Sic transit gloria mundi’

As each newly elected pope makes his way to the inauguration ceremony, there is a simple but profound moment when ashes are scattered three times across his path, on each occasion accompanied by the phrase ‘sic transit gloria mundi’ (thus passes earthly glory). It is a vivid reminder of the transient nature of temporal power and its inevitable loss but also an invocation to use this power with wisdom, tolerance, sympathy and understanding.

Lord Owen, in his article based on his 2008 Samuel Gee Lecture (pp 428–32), reminds us that for those in a position of authority, power is not always exercised with wisdom and common sense. Abuse of power or ‘hubris’ was described in Ancient Greece where ‘a powerful figure puffed up with overweening pride and self confidence’ treated others with contempt. Such abuse of power, Lord Owen argues, is a hazard among leaders, of all kinds, though common among politicians. He suggests that the abuse of power may amount to a mental disorder and encourages the medical profession to recognise and adopt this new syndrome. He examines many of the features of the syndrome which include an excessive self-confidence in the individual’s own judgement, contempt for the advice and criticism of others and an exaggerated self-belief bordering on a sense of omnipotence. The risk seems to increase with the length of time in power.

Protective features include the retention of personal modesty, access to valued confidants, and an ability to maintain aspects of their previous lifestyle and to eschew the trappings of power. These admirable characteristics are seen in many of the Presidents of our own College, including the present incumbent. Among politicians with such

protective qualities Lord Owen cites President Harry Truman, Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.

He suggests that Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D Roosevelt had hubristic personalities without manifesting the full syndrome. The syndrome is, of course, commonly seen in dictators. He quotes Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Idi Amin and Robert Mugabe as striking examples. He then turns his attention to politicians of the modern era who manifested the syndrome including Margaret Thatcher, George W Bush and Tony Blair.

Finally Lord Owen discusses aspects of the pathogenesis of the syndrome, its prevention and the importance of its detection on the international stage. While we may not be able to scatter ashes across the path of our incoming politicians we might perhaps remind them of Lord Acton’s edict that ‘All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’.

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