If I Were a Member of Parliament

Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn Bey replies to Ismāʿīl Sidqī Pasha

If I were a member of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies, I would say to the Minister of Finance: *Do not listen to Sidqī Pasha or his kind.* For they never speak or write about financial or political affairs without first thinking of themselves—before thinking of anything or anyone else. They are concerned above all with how these policies might touch them, near or far. And when they speak or write, it is only to ward off any loss that such policies might bring them—whether that loss be real or imagined.

Yes, if I were a member of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies, I would tell the Minister of Finance: *Do not listen to Sidqī Pasha or his kind.* They care little for the prosperity of the people, or for their contentment, or for the reform and progress of Egypt. Their thoughts dwell chiefly on their own wealth, their own business, their own private advantage. I recall the day the government proposed to facilitate the fruit trade between Egypt and the Near East, when Sidqī Pasha rose in protest—without a thought that the government's purpose was to allow poor Egyptians to taste oranges and other fruits grown in their own land, fruits that had long been denied them because men like Sidqī preferred to hoard them for export and profit rather than let their fellow citizens enjoy them at a fair price.

If I were a member of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies, I would say to the Minister of Finance: *Do not listen to Sidqī Pasha and his kind*—those who excel in financial talk and economic sophistry, juggling figures and reciting theories as Apollo once whispered oracles to his priestess in the ancient world. For in Egypt today, as in humanity at large, there are matters far graver and nobler than arithmetic, figures, and the oracles of Apollo—graver even than the clever talk of the so-called "experts." Among these matters, the most urgent is that the hungry should eat, the thirsty should drink, and the wretched should find a little respite from their misery; that the people should have even a brief chance to feel that God did not create them to serve Sidqī Pasha and his peers, but to work, to reap the fruit of their labour, and to know some small share of life's blessings now and then.

If I were a member of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies, I would tell the Minister of Finance: *Do not listen to Sidqī Pasha and his kind.* There is no shame in doing justice to civil servants or to the professional classes; no shame in seeking their satisfaction. Civil servants are sons of the people, and so are the professions. The state exists to bring justice and contentment to its people, to enable them to rise and to enjoy life as fully as possible. The state exists for that—and for nothing else. If it fails to achieve it, then it has no meaning, no right to exist, no claim upon the obedience or labour or taxes of its citizens.

If I were a member of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies, I would tell the Minister of Finance: *Do not listen to Sidqī Pasha and his kind,* for when they expound their lofty economic doctrines they do not think deeply or straight; they do not follow the political and social evolution of their age. They are conservatives—conservatives clinging to things long dead, to relics unworthy of preservation. Were they capable of deeper thought, they would see that justice to civil servants, fair treatment of the professions, and the pursuit of social justice serve their own interest as much as anyone's. For civil servants work not for themselves but for all—including Sidqī Pasha and his kind. It is neither just nor useful nor good—nor conducive to social peace—that Sidqī Pasha and his peers should eat their fill and live in luxury, while those who teach their children go hungry, thirsty, and desolate, unable to afford even the bare necessities.

It is no justice, no wisdom, no social security that Sidqī Pasha and his friends should idle at the Muhammad ʿAlī Club, conversing and playing chess and backgammon—needing only a nod or a turn of fortune to have all they wish—while schoolteachers and clerks must sacrifice the price of their own food, their children's food, their clothes, and their children's clothes merely to pay for the transport that gets them to work to serve Sidqī Pasha and his kind.

I remind the Minister of Finance that modesty is the foundation of virtue, and of manliness. There are things better left unsaid—but they do not think straight, for they forget that the civil servants and professional classes whom the government seeks to satisfy do not take their salaries to hoard or to speculate or to buy land. They spend what they earn on themselves and their families; they take from the government only to return it to the people. Thus they do not hinder production—they strengthen and enrich it. Justice toward employees and the professions is good even in the purely economic sense that the wealthy claim to understand best.

Nor do these men comprehend political or social evolution. The dark days are gone when the people existed to serve the state, or to please the rich. Today the people are the end, and the state the means—the instrument of their welfare.

Sidqī Pasha calls himself a conservative when he says that concern for public health is good because it makes the people more productive. No, sir—concern for the people's health is a duty because the people have a right to it. The people are not beasts of burden to be kept fit for labour. They are the very purpose of every political or social order—no more, no less.

If I were a member of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies, I would say to the Minister of Finance the exact opposite of what Sidqī Pasha told him in *Al-Ahrām* this morning. I would say: *You have taken a good step toward justice for civil servants and the professions—but it is far too small. It grants only the least of what you wish to give, and far less than they deserve.* The cost of living is unbearable, and the wages paid to these classes fall miserably short of what they need to secure even the minimum comfort and freedom from hunger and want.

I know that the state's budget limits you—but I also know that the nation's resources could sustain more. It need not remain at seventy million; it could easily reach a hundred million. But you are far too gentle with the rich and far too harsh with the poor. You do not impose the taxes that ought to be imposed, nor do you take from the wealthy what you should take. There is no shame in taxing the rich—none at all—in taking from their wealth a purifying alms, as God Himself commanded. And how greatly they stand in need of purification and expiation!

Look at what the English exact from their rich and their poor—not in wartime alone, but in peace. Take their tax system as a model for Egypt's, and you will find ample means to achieve justice for the professions and civil servants, to grant the Minister of Health the millions he seeks for public welfare, to give the Minister of Education the millions he longs for to teach the people's children, and even to satisfy the Minister of Public Works, who wants millions for projects that enrich the land, multiply its fruit, foster agriculture, trade, and industry—and further enrich Sidqī Pasha and his kind.

You need not hesitate to tax the rich more heavily. Look at how the wealthy of Europe and America understand social solidarity—and how little ours do. There, the rich pay immense taxes, and many give beyond what the state demands—lavishly supporting education, health, and public charity on a scale Sidqī Pasha and his like could never imagine. And yet even there, the poor and the middle classes remain discontented, still seeking a fairer distribution of wealth. What, then, should we

expect in Egypt, where our rich shun taxation, reject solidarity, hoard every blessing for themselves, and rebuke the government whenever it shows a spark of justice or compassion?

Did I not tell you that these men, when they reproach you for what they call waste and I call an attempt at fairness, do not think deeply or straight, nor keep pace with the political and social transformations of our age?

Finally—if I were a member of the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies—I would tell the Minister of Finance a small, brief story, one that might move him to long, searching, even painful thought.

It was in the summer of 1932, when Sidqī Pasha expelled me from the university and drove me into the life of an underpaid, struggling employee. One day, a wealthy man came to visit me in sympathy. I had not asked him for anything, nor had it ever crossed my mind to ask him or anyone else for help. But he felt that social and political convention obliged him to call. He did so, kindly enough. Egypt was then in the grip of a severe economic crisis, and this rich man began to lament his misery. "Can you believe," he said, "that my annual income used to be thirty thousand pounds, and has now fallen to fifteen thousand? Is there any greater misfortune than this?" I smiled and replied, "No." But to myself I thought: *My own income was about twelve hundred pounds a year; now it is nothing—nothing I can count in pounds or even piastres. Yet he calls himself miserable because his income has been halved, and I, who have lost all, feel content, for I have lost nothing worth lamenting.* What is the loss of twelve hundred pounds compared with those who own no business, no fortune, and no wealth?

— **Ṭāhā Ḥusayn**
Al-Miṣrī, 1 April 1944