Cicero, Letter on Provincial Government, 60 B.C.E.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) was a Roman lawyer, philosopher, political theorist, statesman, and noted orator. In this letter to his brother Quintus, governor of the Roman province of Asia, Cicero informed him that he would have to serve a third year in that capacity. He uses the occasion to praise his brother and provide advice about working with publicani, businessmen contracted by the Roman government to undertake functions like collecting taxes. Publicani were frequently in conflict with local communities over tax collecting and an important role of a provincial governor was to broker resolutions to these disputes. Reliance on private contractors rather than state officials in the provinces was a distinctive feature of Roman government, and Cicero’s advice provides insight into the workings of Roman government at the height of its power.


For what trouble is it to govern those over whom you are set, if you do but govern yourself? That may be a great and difficult task to others, and indeed it is most difficult: to you it has always been the easiest thing in the world, and indeed ought to be so, for your natural disposition is such that, even without discipline, it appears capable of self-control; whereas a discipline has, in fact, been applied that might educate the most faulty of characters. But while you resist, as you do, money, pleasure, and every kind of desire yourself, there will, I am to be told, be a risk of your not being able to suppress some fraudulent banker or some rather over-extorti onate tax-collector! For as to the Greeks, they will think, as they behold the innocence of your life, that one of the heroes of their history, or a demigod from heaven, has come down into the province. And this I
say, not to induce you to act thus, but to make you glad that you are acting or have acted so. It is a splendid thing to have been three years in supreme power in Asia without allowing statue, picture, plate, napery, slave, anyone’s good looks, or any offer of money—all of which are plentiful in your province—to cause you to swerve from the most absolute honesty and purity of life. What can be imagined so striking or so desirable as that a virtue, a command over the passions, a self-control such as yours, are not remaining in darkness and obscurity, but have been set in the broad daylight of Asia, before the eyes of a famous province, and in the hearing of all nations and peoples? That the inhabitants are not being ruined by your progresses, drained by your charges, agitated by your approach? That there is the liveliest joy, public and private, wheresoever you come, the city regarding you as a protector and not a tyrant, the private house as a guest and not a plunderer? . . .

And indeed, Plato, the fountain-head of genius and learning, thought that states would only be happy when scholars and philosophers began being their rulers, or when those who were their rulers had devoted all their attention to learning and philosophy. It was plainly this union of power and philosophy that in his opinion might prove the salvation of states. And this perhaps has at length fallen to the fortune of the whole empire: certainly it has in the present instance to your province, to have a man in supreme power in it, who has from boyhood spent the chief part of his zeal and time in imbibing the principles of philosophy, virtue, and humanity. Wherefore be careful that this third year, which has been added to your labor, may be thought a prolongation of prosperity to Asia. And since Asia was more fortunate in retaining you than I was in my endeavor to bring you back, see that my regret is softened by the exultation of the province. For if you have displayed the very greatest activity in earning honors such as, I think, have never been paid to anyone else, much greater ought your activity to be in preserving these honors.
What I for my part think of honors of that kind I have told you in previous letters. I have always
regarded them, if given indiscriminately, as of little value, if paid from interested motives, as
worthless: if, however, as in this case, they are tributes to solid services on your part, I hold you
bound to take much pains in preserving them. Since, then, you are exercising supreme power and
official authority in cities, in which you have before your eyes the consecration and apotheosis of
your virtues, in all decisions, decrees, and official acts consider what you owe to those warm
opinions entertained of you, to those verdicts on your character, to those honors which have been
rendered you. And what you owe will be to consult for the interests of all, to remedy men’s
misfortunes, to provide for their safety, to resolve that you will be both called and believed to be
the “father of Asia.”

However, to such a resolution and deliberate policy on your part the great obstacle are the
*publicani*: for, if we oppose them, we shall alienate from ourselves and from the Republic an
order which has done us most excellent service, and which has been brought into sympathy with
the Republic by our means; if, on the other hand, we comply with them in every case, we shall
allow the complete ruin of those whose interests, to say nothing of their preservation, we are
bound to consult. This is the one difficulty, if we look the thing fairly in the face, in your whole
government. For disinterested conduct on one’s own part, the suppression of all inordinate
desires, the keeping a check upon one’s staff, courtesy in hearing causes, in listening to and
admitting suitors—all this is rather a question of credit than of difficulty: for it does not depend
on any special exertion, but rather on a mental resolve and inclination. But how much bitterness
of feeling is caused to allies by that question of the *publicani* we have had reason to know in the
case of citizens who, when recently urging the removal of the port-dues in Italy, did not
complain so much of the dues themselves, as of certain extortionate conduct on the part of the
collectors. Wherefore, after hearing the grievances of citizens in Italy, I can comprehend what happens to allies in distant lands. To conduct oneself in this matter in such a way as to satisfy the publicani especially when contracts have been undertaken at a loss, and yet to preserve the allies from ruin, seems to demand a virtue with something divine in it, I mean a virtue like yours. To begin with, that they are subject to tax at all, which is their greatest grievance, ought not to be thought so by the Greeks, because they were so subject by their own laws without the Roman government. Again, they cannot despise the word publicanus, for they have been unable to pay the assessment according to Sulla’s poll-tax without the aid of the publican. But that Greek publicani are not more considerate in exacting the payment of taxes than our own may be gathered from the fact that the Caunii, and all the islands assigned to the Rhodians by Sulla, recently appealed to the protection of the senate, and petitioned to be allowed to pay their tax to us rather than to the Rhodians. Wherefore neither ought those to revolt at the name of a publicanus who have always been subject to tax, nor those to despise it who have been unable to make up the tribute by themselves, nor those to refuse his services who have asked for them. At the same time let Asia reflect on this, that if she were not under our government, there is no calamity of foreign war or internal strife from which she would be free. And since that government cannot possibly be maintained without taxes, she should be content to purchase perpetual peace and tranquility at the price of a certain proportion of her products.

But if they will fairly reconcile themselves to the existence and name of publican, all the rest may be made to appear to them in a less offensive light by your skill and prudence. They may, in making their bargains with the publicani not have regard so much to the exact conditions laid down by the censors as to the convenience of settling the business and freeing themselves from further trouble. You also may do, what you have done splendidly and are still doing,
namely, dwell on the high position of the *publicani*, and on your obligations to that order, in such a way as—putting out of the question all considerations of your *imperium* and the power of your official authority and dignity—to reconcile the *Greeks* with the *publicani*; and to beg of those, whom you have served eminently well, and who owe you everything, to suffer you by their compliance to maintain and preserve the bonds which unite us with the *publicani*. But why do I address these exhortations to you, who are not only capable of carrying them out of your own accord without anyone’s instruction, but have already to a great extent thoroughly done so? For the most respectable and important companies do not cease offering me thanks daily, and this is all the more gratifying to me because the *Greeks* do the same. Now it is an achievement of great difficulty to unite in feeling things which are opposite in interests, aims, and, I had almost said, in their very nature. But I have not written all this to instruct you—for your wisdom requires no man’s instruction—but it has been a pleasure to me while writing to set down your virtues, though I have run to greater length in this letter than I could have wished, or than I thought I should.