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The Oration of Pericles

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law…what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses… We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law.

Here each individual is interested not only in his affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics-this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.

Guiding Questions

1. What does Pericles mean when he says, “what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses?”

2. Pericles states that, “a man who takes no interest in politics,” has, “no business here at all.” According to the text and background reading, why would the person who is not interested in politics have no place in Athens?