

What Hope for British Politics

Michael Marshall

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Two speeches given this month pointed to some of the stresses which are appearing more and more clearly in British political life. Mr. Jeremy Thorpe, leader of the Liberal Party, spoke of a danger to democracy. "The politics of persuasion are rapidly giving way to the politics of defiance," he said.

"With each successful challenge, whether to the rule of law or to Parliament or to the elected Government, faith in the effectiveness of reasoned argument as an instrument of challenge is reduced." This encourages other groups to take up the same tactics, and Mr. Thorpe believed that the remedy lay in making the electoral system more responsive to the people's wishes.

The second speech was made by the president of Rotary International Mr. E.R. Harrop, to a gathering of 5000 people at the club's 50th annual conference. Mr. Harrop made a call to stand up and be counted in a world where freedoms were being eroded. Young people should be given more responsibilities and opportunities if the Free World were not to be swallowed by communism.

He said that Greece and Rome had fallen because of a marked decline in personal and moral standards. He saw this repeated today with deception and decline in respect for the law replacing honesty and a sense of duty. Selfishness and lack of discipline were at the root of many of today's problems over sex, drugs, family breakdowns and even road accidents.

The two speeches, in different ways, put their finger on some of the sickness in the body politic and its roots in society through attitudes that are becoming more and more widespread. But a wind of change is beginning to stir more and more. The "bread and circuses" attitude of those who have been prepared to trade their freedom and the spiritual qualities of life for inflated wage packets is starting to wear thin.

Questions of Values

Many people have been profoundly troubled for some years now at the emphasis placed in politics and other fields of public life upon economic and materialistic questions at the expense of questions of moral values and standards within society, in entertainment, education, the law and crime and so on.

The trouble was that so many who thought this way remained silent -- often because they just did not know what to do. But there seems to be a definite movement afoot whereby more and more people are showing their support for the Christian principles at the heart of western democracy.

Groups such as the Festival of Light, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, and the Responsible Society are raising questions of value and principle and are finding a widening audience. One recent sign of what, it must be prayed, is a new spiritual awakening, was the appearance of a full-page notice in The Times, a rallying call to all Christians and men of good conscience.

What this bold notice, by a group of concerned Christians, declares is reflected by the feelings of thousands of men and women up and down the country. The problem is that for a long time this feeling has not been expressed In Parliament or in public debate in general.

Out of Touch

For far too long for the good of our nation's health, Parliament has drifted out of touch with the feelings of a large number of people in the country, and has been far out of touch with the will of God. Since the days of "You've never had it so good!" through the "white-hot heat of the technological revolution" we have been served with empty slogans instead of inspiration and spiritual leadership.

All debate with any meaning has been overwhelmingly focused on economic affairs. With all this concentration of attention on economics you might suppose that the combined or massive assault of governmental intellect on such problems would have dispelled them from our shores once and for all.

Far from it. Our economic situation is now worse than it has ever been for very many years. All the concentration on materialistic questions has made the calculation of profit and loss, wage rise and price rise, balance of payments deficits and rates of growth into an almost universal yardstick of value.

Twenty years and more of the growing obsession with the material has bred the spirit of "I want" ("and anyone else will just have to make out for themselves") or "give me" ("or I shan't do a stroke more work and blow who suffers"). This has damaged the unity of the nation through grab and counter-grab. Spiritually we have become ill, and as a result our economic sickness has grown more, not less acute.

All of this has actually damaged the spirit of the nation. So although many people may make new resolutions and desire a reversal of direction, it takes some time and effort to put right the harm done. I have had experience of people who have taken 'soft' so-called harmless drugs over a period, and then decided they wanted to change. They gave up the drug all right but it left its mark in severely limiting their ability to concentrate for any length of time. That damage was eventually overcome, but not in a day, and not without some sweat.

The damage done in the case of the nation is that Parliament and the people of the country have drifted apart until, in a true sense, Parliament is no longer truly representative of the feelings in the country at large. An example of this is the rejection, twice, by a large majority in Parliament of the death penalty for any form of murder. Their two decisions certainly do not reflect the feeling of the majority of the population on this subject.

What has brought about this widening gulf? For a start, the fact that so many political leaders have spoken for so long in empty clichés has alienated people. But when you reduce politics to a discussion of economic matters only, it is found to be that when someone tries to clothe these concerns in the language of loftier issues, what comes out is just hollow-sounding rhetoric.

Rubber Stamp

Then there was the widespread feeling that for most purposes, the Party system had made Parliament into little more than a rubber stamp. The result was that an alarmingly large section of the population came to regard politics as of no interest to them, or worse still, came to hold politicians in contempt.

Last year, when we had two elections, the papers were asking how would we all bear it. It was not the excitement they thought might be too much but the boredom of the same arid issues being repeated again and again. The widespread apathy towards politics indicates just how far Parliament has gone from the real interests and concerns of many of its subjects.

This is worrying, certainly, but more than that, it is dangerous. Dangerous because when large numbers lose interest and turn their backs on Parliament, because it does not speak for or to them, it leaves Parliament itself open to pressure from all sorts of interest groups and powerful bodies. In this situation politics becomes even more a bargaining ground for such groups and even further removed from the concerns of ordinary people.

Today, as a result, we have a government that is more closely tied to one powerful group -- the unions, than any modern government has been. So while the feeling that our economic ills should be met by a cooperative effort from all parties is quite widespread, and the idea of a government of national unit) has been talked about, in actual fact the present government has promoted policies which, whatever you may think of their merits or otherwise in themselves, could not be said to bring the nation together. Rather the opposite.

Interference

One effect of the attempt to promote a particular viewpoint through the central government has been that more and more legislation is passed, dictating more and more how people should conduct their lives. So the law has gradually changed from a means to maintain harmony in society to an instrument of interference. The sheer weight of law threatens to overwhelm the individual.

Currently the law is being used to impose a uniform System of education for example, and to bring about major changes in industry. That is well and good when the law is reflecting a strong feeling among a majority of the population.

But when it is not, it can only bring the law into increasing contempt. Justice and the contents of the law are not the same thing and when people feel there is no justice in the law, it is time to start worrying. If a group of people feel that a particular law is passed simply to serve the interests of another group in society at their expense, they are going to be tempted to ignore that law or demonstrate against it.

This, especially when they have the example of M.P.'s asking for the law to be waived to condone the thuggery of the Shrewsbury pickets, or the Clay Cross councilors being encouraged to break the law and give the promise that it would be changed in their favor by the present Leader of the House of Commons when he was in opposition.

This is the recipe for the disappearance of any national spirit under a welter of struggling self-interest. The part played in this by the gulf between Parliament and people is reflected in other spheres. In local government, the newly created authorities are truly the child of that popular resort of modern government, the investigation by commission. Looking at the thing in the cold light of logic, no doubt the solution they found was the most rational, and cost-effective one as far as material problems were concerned.

Individual As Statistic

But it also created bodies that were that much more distant, impersonal and hence difficult to have a dialogue with from the viewpoint of the individuals whose affairs they administer. The area where the individual has become a statistic amid piles of data will have grown, and that where he is directly concerned in governing the conduct of his own affairs have shrunk by that much more.

This situation though, is not just to be found in government, local or national. It has become a feature of the business and commercial world. The demise of the small merchant, the private trader, has just about entered legend. And this has meant that more people have lost more control of their destiny.

In a town such as Hull, for example, there were any number of merchants locally based involved in the trade in and out of the port, as late as the 1950's. Most of these have now been absorbed by larger concerns with head offices mainly in London.

Here the success or failure of a commercial concern is determined by the red or black ink of the accountant's figures. Often then, business decisions are made on this basis which affect the livelihoods of many people, by men who need have no direct experience of the intricacies of the business concerned.

Where this would help would be that in many cases a local man with direct knowledge of the business might be able to see that although there was a loss made it was as a result of circumstances which could be overcome by undertaking a certain course of action.

The examples given are just two instances of the trend towards greater interference and less personal freedom and initiative. If that trend continues it will strangle the spirit of many people, and as I mentioned before, damage the spirit of the nation.

What then can be done? Clearly a change must come and it must be the change that many people are feeling in their hearts is the only one that matters, that this nation return to God. The spirit of unity, rising above self-interest, that comes from God. The spirit of community in which each person feels he is involved and has a useful part to play, that too comes from God.

Christian Voice Needed

One lesson to be learned from the Bible and history is that God manifests His power where there is unity among men seeking His will, and not in the middle of division. So that is what we must seek if this nation is to turn to God once more.

As I remarked, the spiritual damage caused by selfishness and division cannot be overcome in a flash. It requires effort. While it is true that this nation needs a spiritual revival, this does not mean that it will be some sort of instant almost magical remedy.

Men who love God must strive to bring His ways into the life of the country. The people of Israel wandered for forty years in the wilderness under Moses before entering the promised land, and Jesus struggled with Satan in the desert before embarking on his mission. God is not going to do it all for us; nor is it enough to think just of personal salvation any more. In this age God is inspiring men, but He is seeking our response and responsibility.

What is needed is for a Christian voice to be heard in the country. That is the responsibility of each one of us. It is up to us to make sure that M.P.'s are not estranged from the general feeling of most people, but that they know and reflect the view of concerned believers.

One good result of the Common Market debate may be the weakening of rigid party lines. This may encourage more people not to think only in terms of all-embracing categories of Labor or Conservative. It can only be a healthy step if there is a growth of interest in what individual M.P.'s, or at elections, the candidates, stand for, and not just in which party they are from.

From such an interest would come a greater, more direct concern to see men of good conscience in Parliament. This must be brought about if the powerful and selfish in all classes and walks of life are not to dominate society and bring it down to strife and godlessness.

It is really up to all who love God, not to allow ourselves to be subdued but to bear witness courageously to God's truth. Also, in speaking out, to find and unite with representatives in Parliament prepared to do likewise. This will form a channel through which the power of God can flow to make this nation once more a Godly land.