

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE GOAL IS SELF-GOVERNMENT

*"To educate the wise man, the State exists; and, with the appearance of the wise man, the State expires."*

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, 1844.

It is my settled conviction that British parliamentary government is better than any other method of government, better than any other variety of democracy, and better now than it ever was in the past.

At the same time it has never been more bitterly attacked, not only abroad but at home. It is assailed by fascists from the right, by communists and even by socialists from the left; from the right as dangerous; from the left as cumbersome. Yet, insomuch as this war is one of conflicting principles, it is being waged for or against parliamentary government.

Whereas fifty years ago our form of government had spread and was developing throughout the whole civilized world, it is now beaten back—out of Asia, out of South America, out of Europe—back to its original home at Westminster. If one listens to talk in our clubs, or messes, or common rooms, one may indeed fear lest 'our finest hour' should be also our last. Democracy is no longer sacrosanct; it must stand on its own merits—on reason.

#### BRITISH DEMOCRACY IS THE BEST

When I allege that our democracy is better than any other method of government, many will agree that democratic rule is better than theocratic rule, or aristocratic rule, or autocratic rule. But, better than any other form of democracy! The shades of Alexander Hamilton and (some of) the

fathers of the Constitution will rise in protest. Better than ever in the past! Sir Robert Peel and Mr. Gladstone will join Mr. Disraeli in acid comment.

Let me therefore define what I mean by 'better'. I do not wish to prove that Parliament is most efficient in war or in peace; that it truly represents the people (for I often hope that it does not); that it has created the powerful British Empire by intelligent planning, and that by more intelligent planning and drilling it can produce that after-the-war reconstruction of the universe of which we dream. Oh no! On those lines I have no wish to contest supremacy with Hitler.

The principle was laid down by William Godwin: "Society is produced by our wants, and Government by our wickedness. Society is in every state a blessing; government, even in its best state, but a necessary evil."

So I am going to judge degrees of excellence in government by how far government enables the governed to do without them, enables the subject to become a master, a self-respecting citizen; the mob to acquire judgment and conscience; the selfish to respect the rights of others; the animal to become divine; the wise man to emerge who shall need no coercion to deal honestly, humanely and justly by his fellows. Do we approach the Golden Rule?

#### THE HARD TEST

It is a hard test, one which I expect no leader to achieve except in theory. I only recall those in authority to fundamentals, and ask: "How far have leaders of State or Church made themselves unnecessary? How far have they developed in those they lead, self-respect, character, self-control, self-sacrifice and obedience to reason and conscience? How far do they *wish* to abdicate because those they led have become, in the words of St. Peter, 'as free as the servants of God'?"

“An impossibly high test!” “No relation to practical politics!” “If that is what he means by ‘better’ we may be permitted to prefer Mussolini and the Pontine marshes.” Scorn descends upon my head, and leaves me unbowed. For, as a theory, most Englishmen and all Scotchmen who read that last paragraph will exclaim with satisfaction and acclaim the philosopher.

It is an acid test. Put the question to the bishops of the Church of England—not the raw suffragan from Mirfield, but to one who has long had responsibility for State and Church from a seat in our Parliament. Ask him: “Is your work to teach your flock to do without you; to stand upright alone; to judge wisely for themselves; to acquire character and a conscience fit to be followed at any sacrifice? Or do you teach and believe that human nature is permanently depraved, and see in that good ground for the permanent dependence of man upon the priest, for perpetual external guidance?”

You must decide between the two doctrines. You cannot have it both ways. The swaddling-clothes, controlling man’s mind and action, must be unwound—or retained. You may question the speed, but not the goal. Faced with that test, most of the leaders of the Church of England, all of the Church of Scotland, all Non-conformist divines, would see the truth and pass the test. But no Pope and no bishop of the Greek or Catholic Churches could possibly agree to the unwinding of those swaddling-clothes from round the conscience and mind of the individual. They alone know the way; they alone can show the way; they are for ever indispensable.

I bring the Church into the question, firstly, because religious leaders are, perhaps, more honest and certainly more philosophic than statesmen, who are continually harried by

the immediate issues of expediency. The Churches have thought this out long ago, though the point ever needs re-statement. Mankind is still so far from perfect that the Churches vested interest in man's need for moral guidance is hardly threatened. Belief in the perfectibility of human nature, in the conversion to the image of God, is orthodox christianity. They can accept the idea that man may develop through the ages from the animal to the divine. They wish for that consummation; they can work for it; they can think how best to help it forward.

So I drag an unwilling Church into politics that they may face that same problem which should face the statesman: how best to help forward the virtue and conscience and character of the governed. Do you make people good by control, by laws and regulations, by police and coercion? Or is a better result obtained by percept, example, reason and freedom? The child tumbles, but walks, as we unwind the swaddling-clothes; the man must be unbound and have a chance to fall—even to choose wrong, if he is ever to learn to choose right. In that one sentence lies all the case I would make for freedom—for our form of democracy by reason, by trial and by error.

#### AUTHORITY IS THE ALTERNATIVE

My second reason for questioning Church before State is that both the issue and the dividing line are so clear-cut. The Church of England may hesitate; the Church of Rome cannot: liberty and authority are clearly at variance. The libertarian school seeks to develop the individual conscience by appealing to reason and by trusting the individual; the authoritarian school distrusts fallible man and appeals to an inspired faith, buttressed by law.

This clear cleavage is not so evident, but exists as fundamentally, in politics as in religion, in State as in Church. The authoritarian, whether crypto-fascist or doctrinaire socialist, does not accept the perfectibility of human nature; or the virtues of reason and freedom; or, in fine, the supreme merits of British parliamentary democracy. He calls ever for coercive action, not for debate; for obedience, not for thought. Marx and Mosley, Pollitt and 'Colonel Blimp',<sup>1</sup> are at one with an infallible Pope or an efficient dictator.

The faithful Roman Catholic says that in matters of religion he owes allegiance to Rome, but in matters of state his allegiance is to the governors of that land in which he lives. I do not think it is possible to distinguish between such twin allegiances. It is the same question that assails him over Church and State. *Quo vadis?* Are you leading towards universal obedience or towards the risks and illumination of freedom?

If I stress the illuminating or educational functions of British parliamentary rule, heaven forbid that I should be supposed to approve of our established system of providing 'wisdom' for working-class children. There, authoritarians enthroned, teach *what* to think; and canalize approved 'wisdom' in the guise of information. So far as instruction goes beyond reading, writing and arithmetic, they seek to provide the manual and mental dexterity of the 'really useful citizen'. They would be puzzled, as by a paradox, were you to suggest that the most 'useful citizen' should not accept their authority, but be a rebel against authority.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sir Oswald Mosley, former leader of the British Union of Fascists is in gaol. Harry Pollitt is Secretary of the British Communist Party. 'Colonel Blimp' is a legendary figure invented by the cartoonist David Low. 'Col. Blimp' is supposed to embody the type of ultra-conservative Englishman, full of insular prejudices, whose club is his home and who objects to radicals and un-English methods. M.S.

<sup>2</sup> In 1938 I sponsored a strike of school-children in one of my constituency mining villages. A rearrangement of schools had involved some 100 children

It is precisely that illumination and education—that drawing out of the reasoning powers of adult man—which has been the outcome of 700 years of parliamentary growth and experience. Debate and struggle, trial and error, rebellion and revolt (in matters small and great)—these are the perpetually renewed lessons which have created the thinking machine of British democracy.

#### DEMOCRACY IS GOVERNMENT BY REASON

Democracy is not government by counting heads, but government by debate and explanation. Reasons must be given for everything, not for fear of an adverse vote, but to preserve the reputation of the Minister for sound sense and clear judgment. The front Government bench is a body of thin-skinned normal men, competing with each other for the good opinion of the House. Tell a Minister: "Of course I do not agree with you; but you made out a good case," and he is transported to the seventh heaven. Tell him: "You made out a rotten case; I could have done better myself," and he goes back to his office, conscious of failure, to curse his officials for not anticipating the adverse arguments.

This is government by debate, and it has been going on continuously in England day after day for 400 years. Not one issue in ten ever goes to a vote; and, if it is voted on, that is of little importance compared with the effect of the debate—on the House, on the Press, on the country, and on the Minister's reputation. On May 8, 1940, Mr. Chamberlain

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in a one-and-a-half mile walk to school along a dangerous road, and they could not get home for the mid-day meal. It ended, as everything British always does, in a compromise; but the shocked horror of the County Education Authority at finding a Member of Parliament and Privy Councillor abetting illegality was very good for the Authority and for the children. I had to explain that the children lost three months' normal *training*, but acquired more valuable *education*. They would never forget that lesson. The bureaucracy should not count on too much docility; nor forget that it is they who are the servants.

got his vote<sup>1</sup>; he got his majority; but the debate, and his contribution to it, drove him from the House a beaten man.

PRESS AND PUBLIC REQUIRE REASON

Debate is no longer confined to Parliament. For two hundred years the Press has been taking part—with one eye on their proprietors and the other on the best 'case' for their readers. And now the public have joined in too! Formerly the best chance for them used to be at election time, particularly at by-elections; but now the protesting elector fills the letter-box of his Member of Parliament (hereinafter referred to as M.P.), often with copies of what he has written to Mr. Churchill. Good! That is all government by debate; it all demands a good case, circumspection and caution on the part of the Executive. Or the Executive might be incited to action, even to open a second front! Moreover, all taking a hand, acquire a sense of responsibility for their government.

There are always common-form letters, organized by the various associations—*e.g.*, for or against the drink trade. Postcarding your Member of Parliament was and is the normal method employed by the vested interests. But when I entered Parliament other letters from constituents were rare; those from an unknown public were even rarer. Such as there were concerned personal affairs mainly—appointments of Justices of the Peace,<sup>2</sup> government contracts, or accident compensation. The growth of state concern for (or interference with) the lives of individual citizens—protective tariffs,

<sup>1</sup> Actually, on the question that the House do now adjourn, the voting was 281 to 200.

<sup>2</sup> Unpaid local judges, whose chief functions are to try minor offenses punishable by short prison terms and small fines and to hold preliminary hearings with respect to more serious crimes, to determine whether the evidence warrants trial proceedings. M.S.

pensions, insurance, war, etc.—have immensely increased the letters from constituents and the work of the Member of Parliament. But in addition thereto we now get an ever-increasing fan mail, dealing with general matters of administration. This is the growth of the last ten years. Every reported speech, every broadcast, every article in the Press, brings in a shoal of letters—advice, encomiums, or abuse. All are taking a hand in the perpetual debate—over China, Abyssinia, Spain, Fascism, or religion—and all influence the recipient. While he may deplore the anonymous threats of immediate or future ‘liquidation’, he cannot but be inspired to increased activity by the just admiration of those who so eloquently recognize his wisdom!

#### ALL SHARE RESPONSIBILITY

It would appear indeed that most of the inhabitants of England now feel that they share with the Government the responsibility for governing the world. For this wholly desirable growth of individual responsibility we have to thank not only Parliament, but the Press and the Gallup polls. All these elements are included in what we may call the parliamentary method of government by reason and debate. All are essentially educational instead of coercive. All involve the effort of thinking *for* ourselves, and not only *of* ourselves. They widen the mind, broaden the sympathies, develop the conscience. The fascist slogan, “Britons, mind your own business”, makes a diminishing appeal; not because ‘our business’ seems to have pretty wide contacts, but because an increasing number feel a sense of responsibility for Indians, Jews, Africans, and Poles, as well as for those once poorer fellow-citizens with whom this war has brought us all into closer contact.



This widening sympathy and sense of responsibility, sponsored by parliamentary government, is still, I fear, to be found only in Great Britain. It is not to be found to a comparable extent in any Dominion, not even in America, nor in any of the old European or Asiatic lands. That it is peculiar to Great Britain is largely due to our age-long system of parliamentary government.

#### BLACK PAGES, AND THE NON-CONFORMIST CONSCIENCE

The various revolts of the free religions have also played a part in the formation of what came to be called scornfully 'the Non-conformist conscience'. It has led to the charge of hypocrisy against the whole British race, because the conscience of the few has not often been in a position to convert the minds or restrain the acts of the many. But it is just as well that there should always have been at least the few to protest in Parliament and, however slowly, to convert the majority to a like sense of responsibility.

There have been plenty of black pages in our history. Let us admit it! Black pages stand in our history as in the history of all other countries and religions. But there is this difference between us and the other criminals. While the bad deeds were actually being done, there were found Englishmen who dared to protest in public in Parliament, to denounce the guilty Government of their own country, to correct, and finally to convert. Where else has that been done? Where else would it have been tolerated? Elsewhere, only the silence of indifference or fear!

#### THE GROWTH OF CONSCIENCE

I propose to trace the growth, in or through Parliament, of this sense of responsibility, this widening sympathy which

grew into a public conscience, and now constitutes the chief and most unique glory of our version of democratic rule.

This growth of reasoned responsibility—or of conscience in administration—which has been so marked a feature in British public life for the last 170 years, began with Lord Mansfield's assurance of freedom for the slave who touched British soil,<sup>1</sup> with the opposition to the war against the American colonies, with Howard's<sup>2</sup> prison reforms, with Wilberforce and Clarkson denouncing the slave trade.

From Peterloo (1819) onwards, it coloured and transformed all our ideas of duty to and responsibility for the poor; from 1848 conscience took on responsibility for the oppressed of Europe—Italians, Poles, Magyars, Russians and Jews. The doctrine of trusteeship for coloured peoples under our rule was linked more closely in its early stages with missionary enterprise than with Parliament or the Press. The settlement of Freetown in Sierra Leone, 1786, and the quarrel with the Boer farmers ending in the Great Trek, 1836, were essentially the result of missionaries working on the social conscience of the governing class. So potent was the hold of evangelical religion on the Victorian British, that Parliament, when forced to take sides between the man on the spot and the natives, often actually followed conscience as reflected by the missionaries, and always proposed to do so.

The Constitution for Cape Colony in 1853 gave the first votes to coloured people, soon to be followed in the West Indies and New Zealand. Probably the clearest evidence of this conscience, which we are now told to despise, flashed out in the violent agitation over Governor Eyre's hangings in Jamaica in 1865. Mill and the humanitarians faced

<sup>1</sup> In 1777: "Let the negro be discharged", *Forever Freedom*, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> An 18th century philanthropist who brought about many much needed reforms both in prison conditions and legal procedures. M.S.

Carlyle and the authoritarians across a gulf which divided the whole nation. 'Liberty' and 'Hero-worship' were in just such antithesis as are democracy and fascism today. It is doubtful whether our ignorant Nazis prefer even their conception of an illiberal, tyrannical Oliver Cromwell to their Saint Thomas Carlyle, the hero-worshipper.

It is not necessary—nor possibly desirable—to pursue here the modern policy of the Colonial Office, or the Irish Office, or the India Office. It suffices for my argument that consciousness of responsibility rather than self-interest has throughout divided this nation in perpetual debate. We may have become less religious-minded, but we have become more convinced that the chief merit of rulers is to fit subjects to rule themselves, and with some reluctance, but with more self-esteem, to get out of the saddle.

Every extension of the franchise in our own land—in 1832, 1868, 1885, 1918; every extension of local government—in 1834, 1867, 1888, 1893, has been a surrender of the reins, developing self-reliance, self-confidence and self-respect, giving to those previously under orders, the power to govern themselves. Just so the greatest of Indian philosophers advocates in double-harness *satyagraha* (self-control) and *swaraj* (home rule).

Every step is fraught with danger, but only by falling can man learn to stand. A little learning is no doubt a dangerous thing; but wisdom can only be attained by dangerous trial, by painful education in the world of men. This education the people of Britain have endured and still endure, and propose to continue until they are hardened and wise enough to be free.