

CHAPTER XXVII

The Appeal to the Public

In real life no one acts on the theory that he can have a public opinion on every public question, though this fact is often concealed where a person thinks there is no public question because he has no public opinion. But in the theory of our politics we continue to think more literally than Lord Bryce intended, that "the action of Opinion is continuous," ¹ even though "its action... deals with broad principles only." ² And then because we try to think of ourselves having continuous opinions, without being altogether certain what a broad principle is, we quite naturally greet with an anguished yawn an argument that seems to involve the reading of more government reports, more statistics, more curves and more graphs. For all these are in the first instance just as confusing as partisan rhetoric, and much less entertaining.

The amount of attention available is far too small for any scheme in which it was assumed that all the citizens of the nation would, after devoting themselves to the publications of all the intelligence bureaus, become alert, informed, and eager on the multitude of real questions that never do fit very well into any broad principle. I am not making that assumption. Primarily, the intelligence bureau is an instrument of the man of action, of the representative charged with decision, of the worker at his work, and if it does not help them, it will help nobody in the end. But in so far as it helps them to understand the environment in which they are working, it makes what they do visible. And by that much they become more responsible to the general public.

The purpose, then, is not to burden every citizen with expert opinions on all questions, but to push that burden away from him towards the responsible administrator. An intelligence system has value, of course, as a source of general information, and as a check on the daily press. But that is secondary. Its real use is as an aid to representative government and administration both in politics and industry. The demand for the assistance of expert reporters in the shape of accountants, statisticians, secretariats, and the like, comes not from the public, but from men doing public business, who can no longer do it by rule of thumb. It is in origin and in ideal an instrument for doing public business better, rather than an instrument for knowing better how badly public business is done.

As a private citizen, as a sovereign voter, no one could attempt to digest these documents. But as one party to a dispute, as a committeeman in a legislature, as an officer in government, business, or a trade union, as a member of an industrial council, reports on the specific matter at issue will be increasingly welcome. The private citizen interested in some cause would belong, as he does now, to voluntary societies which employed a staff to study the documents, and make reports that served as a check on officialdom. There would be some study of this material by newspaper men, and a good deal by experts and by political scientists. But the outsider, and every one of us is an outsider to all but a few aspects of modern life, has neither time, nor attention, nor interest, nor the equipment for specific judgment. It is on the men inside, working under conditions that are sound, that the daily administrations of society must rest.

The general public outside can arrive at judgments about whether these conditions are sound only on the result after the event, and on the procedure before the event. The broad principles on which the action of public opinion can be continuous are

essentially principles of procedure. The outsider can ask experts to tell him whether the relevant facts were duly considered; he cannot in most cases decide for himself what is relevant or what is due consideration. The outsider can perhaps judge whether the groups interested in the decision were properly heard, whether the ballot, if there was one, was honestly taken, and perhaps whether the result was honestly accepted. He can watch the procedure when the news indicates that there is something to watch. He can raise a question as to whether the procedure itself is right, if its normal results conflict with his ideal of a good life. ³ But if he tries in every case to substitute himself for the procedure, to bring in Public Opinion like a providential uncle in the crisis of a play, he will confound his own confusion. He will not follow any train of thought consecutively.

For the practice of appealing to the public on all sorts of intricate matters means almost always a desire to escape criticism from those who know by enlisting a large majority which has had no chance to know. The verdict is made to depend on who has the loudest or the most entrancing voice, the most skilful or the most brazen publicity man, the best access to the most space in the newspapers. For even when the editor is scrupulously fair to "the other side," fairness is not enough. There may be several other sides, unmentioned by any of the organized, financed and active partisans.

The private citizen, beset by partisan appeals for the loan of his Public Opinion, will soon see, perhaps, that these appeals are not a compliment to his intelligence, but an imposition on his good nature and an insult to his sense of evidence. As his civic education takes account of the complexity of his environment, he will concern himself about the equity and the sanity of procedure, and even this he will in most cases expect his elected representative to watch for him. He will refuse himself to accept the burden of these decisions, and will turn down his thumbs in most cases on those who, in their hurry to win, rush from the conference table with the first dope for the reporters.

Only by insisting that problems shall not come up to him until they have passed through a procedure, can the busy citizen of a modern state hope to deal with them in a form that is intelligible. For issues, as they are stated by a partisan, almost always consist of an intricate series of facts, as he has observed them, surrounded by a large fatty mass of stereotyped phrases charged with his emotion. According to the fashion of the day, he will emerge from the conference room insisting that what he wants is some soulfilling idea like Justice, Welfare, Americanism, Socialism. On such issues the citizen outside can sometimes be provoked to fear or admiration, but to judgment never. Before he can do anything with the argument, the fat has to be boiled out of it for him.

That can be done by having the representative inside carry on discussion in the presence of some one, chairman or mediator, who forces the discussion to deal with the analyses supplied by experts. This is the essential organization of any representative body dealing with distant matters. The partisan voices should be there, but the partisans should find themselves confronted with men, not personally involved, who control enough facts and have the dialectical skill to sort out what is real perception from what is stereotype, pattern and elaboration. It is the Socratic dialogue, with all of Socrates's energy for breaking through words to meanings, and something more than that, because the dialectic in modern life must be done by men who have explored the environment as well as the human mind.

There is, for example, a grave dispute in the steel industry. Each side issues a manifesto full of the highest ideals. The only public opinion that is worth respect at this stage is the opinion which insists that a conference be organized. For the side which says its cause is too just to be contaminated by conference there can be little sympathy, since there is no such cause anywhere among mortal men. Perhaps

those who object to conference do not say quite that. Perhaps they say that the other side is too wicked; they cannot shake hands with traitors. All that public opinion can do then is to organize a hearing by public officials to hear the proof of wickedness. It cannot take the partisans' word for it. But suppose a conference is agreed to, and suppose there is a neutral chairman who has at his beck and call the consulting experts of the corporation, the union, and, let us say, the Department of Labor.

Judge Gary states with perfect sincerity that his men are well paid and not overworked, and then proceeds to sketch the history of Russia from the time of Peter the Great to the murder of the Czar. Mr. Foster rises, states with equal sincerity that the men are exploited, and then proceeds to outline the history of human emancipation from Jesus of Nazareth to Abraham Lincoln. At this point the chairman calls upon the intelligence men for wage tables in order to substitute for the words "well paid" and "exploited" a table showing what the different classes *are* paid. Does Judge Gary think they are all well paid? He does. Does Mr. Foster think they are all exploited? No, he thinks that groups C, M, and X are exploited. What does he mean by exploited? He means they are not paid a living wage. They are, says Judge Gary. What can a man buy on that wage, asks the chairman. Nothing, says Mr. Foster. Everything he needs, says Judge Gary. The chairman consults the budgets and price statistics of the government. [4](#) He rules that X can meet an average budget, but that C and M cannot. Judge Gary serves notice that he does not regard the official statistics as sound. The budgets are too high, and prices have come down. Mr. Foster also serves notice of exception. The budget is too low, prices have gone up. The chairman rules that this point is not within the jurisdiction of the conference, that the official figures stand, and that Judge Gary's experts and Mr. Foster's should carry their appeals to the standing committee of the federated intelligence bureaus.

Nevertheless, says Judge Gary, we shall be ruined if we change these wage scales. What do you mean by ruined, asks the chairman, produce your books. I can't, they are private, says Judge Gary. What is private does not interest us, says the chairman, and, therefore, issues a statement to the public announcing that the wages of workers in groups C and M are so-and-so much below the official minimum living wage, and that Judge Gary declines to increase them for reasons that he refuses to state. After a procedure of that sort, a public opinion in the eulogistic sense of the term [5](#) can exist.

The value of expert mediation is not that it sets up opinion to coerce the partisans, but that it disintegrates partisanship. Judge Gary and Mr. Foster may remain as little convinced as when they started, though even they would have to talk in a different strain. But almost everyone else who was not personally entangled would save himself from being entangled. For the entangling stereotypes and slogans to which his reflexes are so ready to respond are by this kind of dialectic untangled.

On many subjects of great public importance, and in varying degree among different people for more personal matters, the threads of memory and emotion are in a snarl. The same word will connote any number of different ideas: emotions are displaced from the images to which they belong to names which resemble the names of these images. In the uncriticized parts of the mind there is a vast amount of association by mere clang, contact, and succession. There are stray emotional attachments, there are words that were names and are masks. In dreams, reveries, and panic, we uncover some of the disorder, enough to see how the naive mind is composed, and how it behaves when not disciplined by wakeful effort and external resistance. We see that there is no more natural order than in a dusty old attic. There is often the same incongruity between fact, idea, and emotion as there might be in an opera house, if all the wardrobes were dumped in a heap and all the scores mixed up, so that Madame

Butterfly in a Valkyr's dress waited lyrically for the return of Faust. "At Christmas-tide" says an editorial, "old memories soften the heart. Holy teachings are remembered afresh as thoughts run back to childhood. The world does not seem so bad when seen through the mist of half-happy, half-sad recollections of loved ones now with God. No heart is untouched by the mysterious influence... The country is honeycombed with red propaganda--but there is a good supply of ropes, muscles and lampposts... while this world moves the spirit of liberty will burn in the breast of man."

The man who found these phrases in his mind needs help. He needs a Socrates who will separate the words, cross-examine him until he has defined them, and made words the names of ideas. Made them mean a particular object and nothing else. For these tense syllables have got themselves connected in his mind by primitive association, and are bundled together by his memories of Christmas, his indignation as a conservative, and his thrills as the heir to a revolutionary tradition. Sometimes the snarl is too huge and ancient for quick unravelling. Sometimes, as in modern psychotherapy, there are layers upon layers of memory reaching back to infancy, which have to be separated and named.

The effect of naming, the effect, that is, of saying that the labor groups C and M, but not X, are underpaid, instead of saying that Labor is Exploited, is incisive. Perceptions recover their identity, and the emotion they arouse is specific, since it is no longer reinforced by large and accidental connections with everything from Christmas to Moscow. The disentangled idea with a name of its own, and an emotion that has been scrutinized, is ever so much more open to correction by new data in the problem. It had been imbedded in the whole personality, had affiliations of some sort with the whole ego: a challenge would reverberate through the whole soul. After it has been thoroughly criticized, the idea is no longer *me* but *that*. It is objectified, it is at arm's length. Its fate is not bound up with my fate, but with the fate of the outer world upon which I am acting.

Re-education of this kind will help to bring our public opinions into grip with the environment. That is the way the enormous censoring, stereotyping, and dramatizing apparatus can be liquidated. Where there is no difficulty in knowing what the relevant environment is, the critic, the teacher, the physician, can unravel the mind. But where the environment is as obscure to the analyst as to his pupil, no analytic technic is sufficient. Intelligence work is required. In political and industrial problems the critic as such can do something, but unless he can count upon receiving from expert reporters a valid picture of the environment, his dialectic cannot go far.

Therefore, though here, as in most other matters, "education" is the supreme remedy, the value of this education will depend upon the evolution of knowledge. And our knowledge of human institutions is still extraordinarily meager and impressionistic. The gathering of social knowledge is, on the whole, still haphazard; not, as it will have to become, the normal accompaniment of action. And yet the collection of information will not be made, one may be sure, for the sake of its ultimate use. It will be made because modern decision requires it to be made. But as it is being made, there will accumulate a body of data which political science can turn into generalization, and build up for the schools into a conceptual picture of the world. When that picture takes form, civic education can become a preparation for dealing with an unseen environment.

As a working model of the social system becomes available to the teacher, he can use it to make the pupil acutely aware of how his mind works on unfamiliar facts. Until he has such a model, the teacher cannot hope to prepare men fully for the world they will find. What he can do is to prepare them to deal with that world with a great deal more sophistication about their own minds. He can, by the use of the case

method, teach the pupil the habit of examining the sources of his information. He can teach him, for example, to look in his newspaper for the place where the dispatch was filed, for the name of the correspondent, the name of the press service, the authority given for the statement, the circumstances under which the statement was secured. He can teach the pupil to ask himself whether the reporter saw what he describes, and to remember how that reporter described other events in the past. He can teach him the character of censorship, of the idea of privacy, and furnish him with knowledge of past propaganda. He can, by the proper use of history, make him aware of the stereotype, and can educate a habit of introspection about the imagery evoked by printed words. He can, by courses in comparative history and anthropology, produce a life-long realization of the way codes impose a special pattern upon the imagination. He can teach men to catch themselves making allegories, dramatizing relations, and personifying abstractions. He can show the pupil how he identifies himself with these allegories, how he becomes interested, and how he selects the attitude, heroic, romantic, economic which he adopts while holding a particular opinion. The study of error is not only in the highest degree prophylactic, but it serves as a stimulating introduction to the study of truth. As our minds become more deeply aware of their own subjectivism, we find a zest in objective method that is not otherwise there. We see vividly, as normally we should not, the enormous mischief and casual cruelty of our prejudices. And the destruction of a prejudice, though painful at first, because of its connection with our self-respect, gives an immense relief and a fine pride when it is successfully done. There is a radical enlargement of the range of attention. As the current categories dissolve, a hard, simple version of the world breaks up. The scene turns vivid and full. There follows an emotional incentive to hearty appreciation of scientific method, which otherwise it is not easy to arouse, and is impossible to sustain. Prejudices are so much easier and more interesting. For if you teach the principles of science as if they had always been accepted, their chief virtue as a discipline, which is objectivity, will make them dull. But teach them at first as victories over the superstitions of the mind, and the exhilaration of the chase and of the conquest may carry the pupil over that hard transition from his own self-bound experience to the phase where his curiosity has matured, and his reason has acquired passion.

1. *Modern Democracies*, Vol. I, p. 159.
2. *Id.*, footnote, p. 158.
3. *Cf.* Chapter XX.
4. See an article on "The Cost of Living and Wage Cuts," in the *New Republic*, July 27, 1921, by Dr. Leo Wolman, for a brilliant discussion of the naive use of such figures and "pseudo-principles." The warning is of particular importance because it comes from an economist and statistician who has himself done so much to improve the technic of industrial disputes.
5. As used by Mr. Lowell in his *Public Opinion and Popular Government*.