

TRENDS AND PORTENTS AT OXBRIDGE

NOT THE least valuable feature of the group of theories we call Georgeism is their utility as a focus to illuminate, and a yardstick to judge, many important social problems with which Henry George himself was not greatly concerned. One such problem is the relation of creative thought to the economic substructure of a period, with particular reference to the 'institutional' thought of universities and academies. To be sure, George had some experience of academic thinkers, and the conclusions he drew from his encounters were unfavourable, as witness the contempt for scholastic economics so freely expressed in his 'Science of Political Economy.' As for his own views, they are only sketched, and they naturally reveal affinities with the common stock of liberal ideas. His theory of the Greater Leviathan is the recognition of a natural order in which social affairs conduct themselves as unconsciously and efficiently as organic metabolisms, thus liberating energy for the individual life of the spirit, the most important expression of which is creative thought, the impelling force behind all progress. 'Progress is a surplus,' he wrote, thereby recognising clearly the need of leisure, freedom and security, if progress (even in its narrow interpretation of technical invention) is to be maintained. But there is only one way to ensure these necessary and sufficient conditions for the natural growth of the human spirit; and we may be sure that George would have agreed with the corollary that, in societies where these conditions do not hold, 'pure' thought will always tend to degenerate into mere ideology.

From this point of view, it is of interest to consider recent developments in our two senior universities. It should be borne in mind that, though we speak only of Oxbridge, our observations are true of the university system of the country as a whole. The demure atmosphere of Oxbridge is unfavourable to such episodes as that at Leicester not long since, whose students organised a stay-out strike by way of a gesture in favour of a Leicester man who, in their opinion, ought to have been elected to a vacant chair, but was passed over for a better qualified outsider. But similar forces are at work.

To begin with, Oxbridge's financial position is less favourable than it was. The university, as opposed to the colleges, has always been relatively poor; but now both, notwithstanding their broad acres, are beginning to feel the pressure of diminished revenues, due to inflation and nationalisation, and of higher costs, due to increased salaries and disbursements for technical equipment. Hence the ever-increasing State grants are assuming a predominant importance in Oxbridge's budget; and no principle is more familiar in the history of English institutions than that he who pays the piper calls the tune.

The burden of Whitehall's tune is clear enough. Those who can stomach official reports have the accumulated fodder of 1943-44 to ruminate on, notably the Fleming, McNair and Norwood reports; while those whose digestions are weak or impaired by excessive gross feeding cannot do better than study Bruce Truscot's 'Redbrick University' and 'Redbrick and these Vital Days.' A greatly increased output of graduates, especially scientists, comparable to American or German figures; more post-graduate research work on the same models; the opening of university careers to all talent, irrespective of financial considerations; and the supersession of the present hegemony of Oxbridge by a country-wide university system organised with a centre, perhaps, in London and with a university for each 'region'—these seem to be the lineaments of the new order in higher education.

But, as so often, the planners are producing, as well as the results they intended, other results which, it is charitable to assume, they did not foresee or intend. Take, first, the great

increase in the number of students at Oxbridge. The most obvious consequence is the excessive strain imposed on the teaching and lecturing staffs. The consequence is that these people have less time for original work, which negates the first principle of a university; namely, that it exists primarily for the advancement of learning, and only secondarily for teaching. It must also be remembered that suitable additional teaching staff is hard to obtain, and more expensive than all colleges can afford. Consider, next, the changing character of the students.

Two forces are here at work. On the one hand, few parents can now afford to send their children to Oxbridge unaided; and in any case the few vacancies are mostly for scholars only. On the other hand, there is the State policy of opening careers to talent and to talent only. In the nature of things, students of the latter type, financially dependent on the State or a local authority, regard themselves as on probation and as presented with a supreme opportunity to better themselves. A first class, or a good second, will open the golden gates to the magic world of the civil service or 'administrative' work; while failure may be quite fatal to all prospects. Hence a narrow concentration, a hectic industry and competitive spirit which form a startling contrast to the leisure and grace which still characterised much of pre-war Oxbridge.

But, it may be asked, is not all this at bottom a good thing? Not wholly. It is not merely that education, university and college suffer from the presence of those who regard them respectively as a passport to a higher income-group, a rubber-stamp for degree-giving, and an inexpensive residential hotel. Rather is it that, as psychologists have pointed out, the maturing mind cannot flourish in this air. Minds, like bodies, have their rhythm of growth, and the university years are designed to cover a supremely important period, that of the birth of independent judgment, the consolidation of the factual matter learnt at school, and the awakening of wide interest-systems remote from the prescribed curriculum. James Thurber's injunction, 'Let Your Mind Alone' contains an educational truth which is at present flouted shamefully.

How are these trends regarded within the university itself? As might be expected, there are sharp diversions of opinion. The senior members divide into two groups. The first make no bones about their opposition to the new scheme of things even when they regard it as 'inevitable.' They will compare the present state of the country to that of the Roman Empire under Diocletian, who, they recall, issued edicts fixing the prices of all goods, and so strangled the life of the country by bureaucratic inquisition and control that the will to resist the outer barbarians evaporated in apathy. They resent their own imminent degradation from creative thinkers to teaching hacks, and quote the prediction of Lord Balfour (an apologist of leisure and speculative thought) that Western culture would perish from overwork. They question the wisdom of creating a frustrated graduate proletariat, the only employment open to which will be to serve as the intelligentsia of some political mass movement, as in India, China or Egypt. And they deplore the wholesale defection of students from arts to sciences, and even within the arts schools, from the humanities proper to such utilitarian schools as Modern History and Social Studies. The second group, the trimmers, are more cautious. If challenged, they will confess a faith in 'planning for freedom' (to use a phrase of Prof. Hayek's) and in the ability of the English political genius to work out a native compromise between individualism and collectivism. But, secretly they trust that the Socialist storm will spend its force against the rocks of industry and finance, and will have blown itself out by the time education's turn is reached. They reckon that the present 'bulge' in numbers will be ironed out as the ex-Service men

are disposed if, after which leisure will again become a reality. And they calculate that Oxbridge, which has survived so many reformers, will outlast these also, wherefore they face the prospect of a Royal Commission of Inquiry with the same confidence as inspired their remote predecessors when threatened with Cromwell's Visitors.

Over against these stand the New Men, younger though no longer young, and, in virtue of their greater energy, probably the dominant faction in Oxbridge affairs to-day. Many of them are well known. The voices of these new-style University Wits are everywhere, in bookshop windows, in politics, and on the Third Programme. One will use English History for his purposes, and another finds Plato a convenient platform. A historian has recently been rebuked by the Leader of the House of Commons for the extreme leftism of his broadcasts on foreign affairs. An economist is one of the best known living exponents of doctrinaire socialism, and there are other economists, less illustrious, who confuse instruction in their subject with propaganda through the medium of socialist political arithmetic. They drift in and out of politics, are as at home at Transport House as in their colleges, and may be found to-day tutoring in political theory, and to-morrow publicly opposing the foreign policy of Mr. Bevin. Most interesting of all are the left scientists, who openly aim at imposing upon thought and on social life as a whole a concept of discipline and control drawn partly from their own laboratories and partly from Moscow. These persons have created a New

Orthodoxy which is perhaps the most significant feature on the Oxbridge horizon to-day.

Youth, however, is notoriously impatient of orthodoxy, however progressive; and those who are interested to observe university thought and gossip call attention to a growing reaction against the Wits, as symbolised by the outcome of recent Union debates. Yet we think there is a danger of their being deceived by a false dawn. For, at present, ex-Service men preponderate at Oxbridge, and to their disenchanted eyes the antics of our modern sophists appear merely contemptible. The test will come some two years hence, when the student population is again young and, perhaps, reprieved from military service. Only then will it become clear whether we are about to witness a youthful intellectual reaction as strong as that which in Europe succeeded the French Revolutionary Wars.

Meantime, let all beware of supposing that the New Men and their fellow-travellers are a whit more amenable to our ideas than the older style academics whom George fell foul of. Quite the contrary, it is certain that there was far more of tolerance and accessibility to liberal notions among the old than among the new. Planners dislike and mistrust the creative individual; he will not fit in and his inventions and dangerous thoughts cut across the blue-prints of 'orderly' development. In thought, as in other spheres of life, our present rulers are likely to prove the Rehoboams of England.

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HOW DO THEY GET THAT WAY?

READERS MAY have followed the recent correspondence in *The Times* between Mr. Douglas Jay, M.P., and various experts in the road and rail transport world. They will have seen the Prime Minister's late economic adviser being driven from point after point, caught out cooking his evidence and misquoting his authorities, pontificating on subjects on which his information was clearly inadequate and finally giving up the game.

But presumably no reader expected that as the result of his inglorious rout Mr. Jay was likely to reconsider his support for the Government's Transport Bill. Still less will it have been expected that he would give any reconsideration to the basis of his Socialist beliefs. Anyone who may have imagined this will have been disillusioned by Mr. Jay's contribution to the debate on the coal crisis when he announced his view that 'there was unquestionably a terrible amount of waste by domestic consumers.' This pearl of legislative wisdom can only have sprung from a mind quite impervious to reason. A government department has been completely caught out and stands convicted of shambling inefficiency; yet this new-style democrat can only think that the consumer is at fault. But Mr. Jay's was not the most lunatic contribution to this debate. Mr. Silverman accused the opposition of 'deliberately talking about a coal crisis which did not exist.'

How do they get that way? How can men in responsible positions maintain this continuous froth of irresponsible inconsequence? And, still more wonderful, how is it that our much enduring public, huddled round its pale blue gas fires with an inch and a half between its utility socks and its corduroy trousers, still continues at bye-election after bye-election to endorse the decision of 1945 that men of this standard of efficiency should be entrusted with the control of industry?

Readers of a non-political journal will not expect a party explanation. The Conservatives will tell you that it is due to dirty work behind the war-time party truce; the Liberals, that it is because they have not had time fully to educate the country in the Beauties of Beveridge; there is any amount of recrimination and doubtless out of it all the historian of the future will

distil a 'non-party' explanation suitable for inclusion in the school textbooks approved by the L.C.C. Meanwhile, using words which have some meaning and pursuing an argument whose steps are in some way related to each other, let us try to discover what has happened and why.

First let it be emphasised that very little has happened. In instance after instance, spokesmen introducing recent Socialist measures have been able to score the legitimate point that the Bill is no more than an extension of a principle already conceded. The tide towards collectivism has been in full flow for more than half a century now. Nothing is stranger in the modern political bedlam than the reiteration that the unemployment figures of 1931 illustrate what happens in a free economy: 1931 when a State broadcasting monopoly had existed for over ten years; when for over twenty years an important section of the public had been sticking stamps on to a card each week to symbolise their inability to pay their own doctor's bills without State aid; when the first generation almost entirely educated by the State was reaching old age; when death duties were thirty-five years old, income tax ninety, and factory legislation over a hundred; and when memory of the ancient right of each man to a share in the use of his native soil, imperfectly represented at any time, it is true, but never quite absent so long as the open fields persisted, had practically vanished from men's minds.

Maybe the election of 1945 was an important nail in the coffin of a free England, the nail perhaps which holds on the silver plate. But the lid was on in 1930, and the body was laid out in 1910. Indeed it was in the eighties of the last century that Herbert Spencer insisted on pointing out to the distracted relatives that their loved one, hardly yet out of adolescence, was going to leave them.

Hardly out of adolescence, for, to drop the metaphor the idea of a free economy had only a very short run, even among the theoreticians whilst it was hardly ever entertained by 'practical politicians.' In this country we had not got rid of nearly all our tariffs before the factory code had become so complex as to need a consolidating act. The old paternalism of the