

# People and Politics — the Changing Scene

BY P. R. HUDSON

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**T**O PEOPLE who believe in the importance of individual liberty—the freedom to choose, work, manufacture, serve, earn, save, spend and organise themselves—the twentieth century pattern of western civilisation presents a constant threat to the principles they cherish. Particularly since the second world war, we have been witnessing an accelerated tendency towards government control in most economic and social aspects of our lives. There are few signs to indicate that the trend will be reversed. Those supporters of individual freedom who also advocate free trade, the taxation of land values and the abolition of taxes on capital and labour, find little comfort in contemporary political policy-making

However, if the achievements of the liberally inclined seem rather small compared with the growth of bureaucracy and control, some comfort may be found in the continued growth and strength of the numbers of people as individuals or in groups who are dedicated to the traditional liberal principles and who are disseminating its ideas and ideals, largely outside recognised political organisations.

Before the first world war, in most technically advanced countries the differences in status among the working, managerial and employing classes were plainly noticeable, and the relatively weak position of the man with nothing but his labour to sell made solidarity an issue, and forced the growth and power of labour movements. The differences in social classes, wealth, power and prestige enabled people to associate themselves more readily with political and other pressure groups. The lack of radio and television made them very much dependent upon the written and the directly spoken word. The public meeting was popular and well attended; causes were fought on an emotional level. Strong words, bold gestures, ridicule and scandal were in vogue and the market squares of Europe were the platforms of political life. Hardship was commonplace and the working man felt he had little to lose if it came to a show-down. It was hardly surprising that the clarion call of socialism found increasing support in an atmosphere conducive to near-revolution in Britain, and positive revolution in Germany Spain and Italy. Those days, however, have passed, and with them the spirit, characteristics and methods of the age. Some European countries have their socialism; others remain in a semi-feudal condition. Britain, and others have "advanced" towards socialism *via* the mixed economy.

The second half of the century, now fifteen years underway, presents a very different challenge. The

philosophy of the welfare state and state paternalism has found almost complete acceptance, and it has been fostered and implemented by government persuasion, fiat, encouragement, management, subsidy, direction and control. Much has been achieved, with the result that the social and economic *atmosphere* today has little in common with that of the past fifty years. The basic economic problems, however, are much the same as they have always been. The welfare state has proved no solution. It works clumsily, expensively, and unfairly; it engenders and encourages apathy, and undermines self-reliance. For some it is also something of a skin-deep sham, beneath which lurks a new style of poverty—even if for others it has blunted the harsher effects of involuntary hardship.

The pursuit of broadly similar policies by opposing political parties has had a special effect on the people as a whole. It has produced a mass electorate that lacks comprehension of the fine political distinctions among the political parties, exemplified by their performances if not by their promises. The public as a whole, enjoying new standards of living in this motor car and washing machine age, is leaving the political thinking more and more to the professional thinker and politician. Even the political representatives themselves are changing in type and outlook. The Wilson government is a manifestation of the rising influence of the professional middle-class. The great causes that were once fought "for the common people" are no more. The political arena today is more concerned with pragmatism than with idealism.

The electorates between elections have largely abandoned their former platforms in political arenas leaving everything in the hands of chosen or elected elites whether they be politically, commercially, or professionally aligned. The elites, of course, are but a small percentage of the population. Difference among them there may be, but the similarities are more marked. The influential power of this group will soon rest mainly with those who were born after 1930, who will be quickly supported by those born after 1945—the children of the new era.

Predominantly middleclass in outlook if not in origin, the products of grammar and comprehensive schools who are technically qualified or who sport degrees obtained with state assistance, will be the technocrats and administrative kings of the future. Their stage has been set. They have emerged from an age of conflict, been educated under an enlightened if misguided system, are technically competent and expect to be called on as experts. To them

with some notable exceptions, the welfare state is an established fact; the social and economic blanket is regarded as a norm; the hand of benign paternalism is accepted almost without question. They are, however, interested in efficiency and have a keen sense of social responsibility. They will shape the future to a very large extent.

The question that remains for the truly liberal minded is how are these people to be reached and influenced. If the days of the popular platform have passed, if the tide of emotionally voiced discontent has been replaced by close knit pressure groups how can the advocates of personal freedom and liberal economic reform reach the new generation so that their earnestness, training and enthusiasm is harnessed to the cause of individual freedom instead of socialism? The next generation may be too late.