

## THE BING BOYS

Frederic Bastiat was before his time. Here is an episode he has unfortunately missed in his *Economic Sophisms*, whereby he could have made more "rollicking fun" for his readers. In the adjournment debate in the House of Commons on December 1st, Col. J. R. H. Hutchinson, the Member for Central Glasgow, offered an addition to the anthology which is known as "Queer Stories by Well-known Authors." It was about the Bing Removal at Bellshill. We give these passages from his speech.

Col. HUTCHINSON said: For the benefit of those hon. Members who do not know what a bing is, and who have the misfortune to have been born south of the Tweed, I would explain that a bing is a collection of refuse products from a mine piled in an unsightly heap. The local authorities in Lanarkshire, anxious to improve amenities at Bellshill, decided they would try to convert some of these bings into different shapes, smoothing them out into terraces, upon which sport of various kinds, and football, might be played. They called for tenders for the purpose of getting this work done and the tenders were eventually narrowed to two, one submitted by a firm by the name of Mapco, of Glasgow, and another by a firm called Ritchie and Co., of Cambuslang. The first concern quoted some £17,000 for the work, and the second quoted some £53,000. One would not have thought that there was a large problem to resolve here—about £36,000 of money to be saved. Apparently, however, it caused doubts in the minds of the Board of Trade, for here the whole story takes a curious turn.

The local authority, backed I understand by the Scottish Office, recommended that the lower tender should be accepted. The question was put to the Board of Trade, who have promised to pay a grant of £53,000 if the highest tender is in fact accepted. The local authority, of course, jumped at this heaven-sent solution to the problem and accepted the higher tender.

What reasons prompted the Board of Trade to bring pressure on the local authority to carry out such a curious transaction? The cheaper contractor was going to use the most modern machinery—scrapers, tractors and bulldozers—and would employ 15 men on this work. Incidentally, they were going to make use for motive power for the tractors of pool gas, the cheapest form of motive power which exists and which is in plentiful supply. The two reasons which have received widespread credence are that the action was taken on the grounds that it might save dollars, and that it would give greater employment if the second and more expensive contract was accepted. The amount of pool gas which would be required in carrying out the work by Messrs. Mapco has been computed by technicians as amounting to between £400 and £450. That is the sum in dollars which is at stake. The time which this contractor would take will be 18 months, compared with the six months by Mapco, and I understand it is the intention of Messrs. Ritchie to employ in certain circumstances tractors and other vehicles of this kind. So far, therefore, as saving dollars is concerned, it is possible that we will lose over this, and putting it on the most favourable terms, the estimate is £400 to be saved in dollars at a cost of £36,000 to the taxpayer.

Mapco will employ 15 men, will take one-third of the time and at a cost of one-third of the money. They could remove three bings for the same cost as Messrs. Ritchie are going to charge the country for the removal of one.

So it is a question of 45 men of Mapco's against some 200 who are likely to be employed in doing this work by means of picks and shovels and hand barrows with Messrs. Ritchie. Is there anything in the contract which says that Ritchie's shall employ a specific number of men, because if it is not in the contract it is very much in his interest not to employ 200 men but to employ a lesser number and use more modern implements and thereby save money and increase his own profits?

At Bellshill the most modern tools have been set aside. The most modern tools to be used upon this work are hand barrows, buckets and shovels. If the Government were being logical, in wanting to accomplish the thing in this way, why do not they say that the men must do the work with teaspoons and children's buckets? I cannot altogether blame the local authority in this matter. They have done nothing, but stand to gain. The rates will contribute nothing. The Unemployment Fund, which, incidentally, must be standing with a very big sum to its credit, will have nothing to pay. The taxpayer will once again be called upon to finance this task carried out in the craziest way which could be conceived.

THE SECRETARY FOR OVERSEAS TRADE (MR. BOTTOMLEY): In April, 1948, the Lanarkshire County Council said they had this colliery bing which covered an area of roughly 17½ acres which they wanted to clear for the improvement of amenities, and in due course for the development of a housing scheme. We asked them to call for the two tenders, and the figures for these which I have and the ones given by the hon. and gallant Gentleman show no great disparity. The lowest tender for mechanical clearance was £19,319, and the lowest for the manual method £53,000. It was anticipated that by using manual methods 170 would be employed over a period of nine months, and I think hon. Members must agree that it would be much better to employ these men rather than leave them doing nothing. Also, we were short of mechanical equipment. The point has been made that we wanted to save dollars. Yes, we do not want to buy machinery from the United States if we can avoid it. We have got some machinery from the United States—for instance, excavators and industrial crawler tractors—but we have now increased home production. Army surplus stores have been released, too, and these machines also help to improve the position. Therefore, we feel that in all the circumstances it is now possible to meet requirements by releasing some of that mechanical equipment for employment on this site. The Government will see to it that assistance will be given to have sites cleared by mechanical means.

Mr. BALDWIN (Conservative—Leominster): What is the value per acre of this land, because it is costing £3,000 an acre to level?

Mr. BOTTOMLEY: I could not give an answer to the last question, but obviously it is desirable work, otherwise the Lanarkshire County Council and the Government would not support it. In regard to the question about inviting tenders, it is still necessary to invite two tenders until we are assured that there is sufficient mechanical equipment and that the labour position in the district is such that it does not warrant the work being done by manual labour rather than by mechanical means.

It is an illuminating story. Despite the concessions to sanity which were extracted from the Minister, it remains embellished by his final remark, indicating a mind

still bemused with the Keynesian-Beveridge fallacies and impenitently determined to repeat the practice. This unemployment problem, what is it but the mess society has got into by permitting the private appropriation of the rent of land, so that pure parasitism exacts its price before there can be any production whatever? And what of the obstructions and penalties superimposed by all that weight of taxation which falls on trade and industry, depriving of their rightful reward all the working people engaged therein, or, worse, shutting down the opportunity to work at all? Have they not a most important bearing on the problem? The cause is obvious and the remedy is clear. In a word, it is to collect the rent of land into the

public treasuries, using the taxation and rating of land values to that end and correspondingly removing the tax-burdens now imposed *on the work of man's hands*—all comprising the wages of labour and the results of industry whatever form they take, in consumable goods, houses and other buildings and improvements, and the rest. Employment cannot be increased nor unemployment cured by the State or the municipality collecting revenue to spend it again on public works. Hopefully, before these experiments have proved fatal as well as vain, the planners will have joined in the ridicule, the world laughing with them. Hopefully, long before then, the command will have been obeyed—remove the barriers!

## AUTHORITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

IN the course of his six Reith lectures, broadcast under the above title, Mr. Bertrand Russell in more than one passage hints at the presence of an iron curtain which under modern conditions tends to deny any unorthodox thinker the opportunity of influencing his fellows. Although Socrates was put to death, he observes, this was after he had attracted public attention to his ideas. To-day says Mr. Russell, a Socrates would not be able to make his ideas known. Some readers might weigh the implications of this statement with the fact that the B.B.C. places its enormous resources at Mr. Russell's disposal periodically for six weeks in succession. Every proposal must be judged on the evidence, but if one suspects our civilisation to be on the decline—and Mr. Russell appears to share this suspicion—the change of thought which must precede any revival is more likely, in the circumstances, to start with an unorthodox and probably unpopular minority than those who enjoy the favour of the present rulers of opinion.

These rulers display all the characteristics of Conservatives who have become Socialist without either discarding Conservative habits of mind or acquiring the revolutionary confidence of the earlier Socialists. Under Socialist forms there is the same deference for power and authority, the same reluctance to throw light on the underlying causes of social evils, the same tendency to compromise with injustice, real or supposed. The wicked capitalist is dispossessed—and then compensated. Under a veil of Socialistic protestations the landlords are secured in all their present and some of their future gains, and hundreds of millions of public money are allocated to them for transferring some of their powers of future exploitation to a State department.

In the realm of social thought men have ceased to believe in the possibility of self-reliance; but they still want to do as they like. In a desperate effort to convince themselves that it is possible to depend on the State and yet limit the powers of the State, they are more disposed to give ear to hazy generalizations than to straightforward appeals based on homely facts which plain men can test by their own observation. Those who sincerely desire an explanation and a basis for reform find little comfort if they consult the orthodox, whether Left or Right.

"I am constantly receiving letters," Mr. Russell tells us, "saying, 'I see that the world is in a bad state, but what can one humble person do about it? Life and property are at the mercy of a few individuals. Economic activities on any large scale are determined by those who govern either the State or large corporations.' I find such letters very difficult to answer," he admits. "I do not profess to know how to cure this evil completely."

After re-reading his lectures (which were reported in *The Listener*) we doubt if any of his admirers could answer at once the question: What does Mr. Russell consider the fundamental defect of our society, and what definite reform does he propose? This is not an unreasonable demand. In the case of other social philosophers an answer could be readily given.

Within the limited space of this review we cannot do much more than comment upon the dissertations of such an inconclusive and generalizing speculator as Mr. Russell. He begins by suggesting that human nature is inherently predatory, and competition must necessarily entail conflict. The possibility that men might co-operate voluntarily while retaining their independence seems ruled out. Without any analysis of economic factors he asserts that large organisations must always be more productive than smaller ones. "Short of the whole planet there is no limit to the advantage of size, both in economic and political organisations." The experiences of State shipping and air lines, a comparison of conditions (say) in Switzerland with those in Russia—these and a host of other examples do not appear to disturb his confidence. He admits this (allegedly) inevitable tendency to centralisation makes civilised, peaceful life so dull that he himself can survive only by the fictitious excitement of reading detective stories. We should stimulate the development of individuality, he declares; but he does not tell us how in the circumstances this can be done. The activities of strongly developed characters, however, "are not of a sort that ought to be general," and "too much liberty brings chaos." We are not told how to distinguish the élite in whom development is to be allowed; nor are we informed how the equal freedom of all can enable any one man to obstruct the freedom of another.

At one moment Mr. Russell seems to consider science as an independent power ruling our lives whether we will or no, and then he divides it into knowledge and something he calls "technique," but leaves undefined. The ruthless domination of this technique seems connected in his mind with the assumption that economic competition is a conflict of extermination and under *laissez-faire* all but the rich must starve. "The evils of early industrialism" are attributed at one moment to *laissez-faire* and at another to injustice. But justice has with Mr. Russell an unusual meaning. "No one can deny," he asserts, "that economic justice requires a very large amount of State control over industry and finance." Such economic justice, however, might be "too dearly bought" because it involves economic uniformity in which everyone would be equal and—were it not for modern "technique"—equally poor. "The case against justice