

# One Face in the Crowd

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"The individual feels safer in a group—he can thus share responsibility as well as shed it."

TODAY, more than ever, we find ourselves living, moving and being moved in groups. We belong to a sports club, trade union, church, old comrades' association, gardening club, music society, or political party. Every human activity sponsors and is catered for by some association or club, and very few of us belong to none.

The behaviour of groups has achieved much in human endeavours, some good and some bad. The larger the group the more power it can exercise, the more it can create or destroy. Group behaviour at its best seldom gives rise to excited interest or desire for closer study and analysis, but at its worst, demands serious consideration and breakdown of its component parts to find out what lies behind the motive force in a group behaving in a manner disturbing and detrimental to people outside the group.

A first class example of group behaviour at its worst is to be found in Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*. In it is a vivid account of the Gordon Riots of 1780, in which a vast amount of senseless injury and damage was perpetrated by a tremendous number of people, most of whom had never been inside a church, Protestant or Roman Catholic, let alone been able to distinguish in any way the one faith from the other.

Dickens describes a mob as "... usually a creature of very mysterious existence, particularly in a large city. Where it comes from or whither it goes, few men can tell. Assembling and dispersing with equal suddenness, it is as difficult to follow to its various sources as the sea itself; nor does the parallel stop here, for the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable or more cruel."

What we would call today a

demonstration, started off in March 1780 and ended up a tragic and unholy mess, an absolute disgrace to an otherwise moderately well-behaved populace.

Today the demonstration seems to be part of our way of life. Scarcely a week passes without some group or other assembling with signs and placards, and proceeding from one place to another chanting its particular slogans. As far as the demonstration remains orderly and peaceful, all is well, for it is one of our hard-won ways in which we express ourselves, but all too often violence occurs when another group interferes with it, and then the cause and purpose—often a legitimate one—is lost in the fracas. Its organisers and supporters will certainly have obtained publicity in the press and on television, but all that will get reported will be the blows struck and the number of people carried away in police vans and ambulances. Our journalists have much to answer for in this top-heavy method of providing news.

All demonstrations contain an element of sincere individuals; they also attract the mischief makers who, because of the golden rule which seems to guide newspaper men, "Good news is no news," obtain by their actions more limelight than they deserve.

The individual feels safer in a group—he can thus share responsibility as well as shed it. He can submerge for a time his own identity, while at the same time give rein to self expression, and he can withdraw from the group when necessary or expedient. Unity, he feels, is strength. He joins a trade union (too often he has to, in order to get the job, but it is not our place to discuss the rights and wrongs of the closed shop here).

In the trade union his individuality is submerged, if not lost, in the

group cause. Since there is no secret ballot he is hesitant to voice his personal opinion; he listens only to the shop stewards and watches his fellow workers to see which way they will vote. A small majority of a fluttering show of hands is termed solidarity and carries a vital decision which may seriously affect his livelihood for weeks and may even lose him his job.

Recently the secret ballot was actually introduced into a dispute at Ford's works, resulting in a clear decision not to strike; but this was declared invalid and a "show of hands" vote later reversed it. The conclusion to be drawn is obvious.

No group decision can be said to represent the sum total of all the individual opinions which comprise it, but even less so can it be said of the open vote as practised by trade unions.

Our parliamentary and municipal electoral system leaves much to be desired, many thousands of carefully cast votes being wasted in the "first-past-the-post" principle, but at least the citizen is assured of privacy and freedom from any kind of intimidation.

Two thousand years ago a crowd in Jerusalem gave the course of history its most violent jolt by yelling for the blood of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet it is doubtful if one person in that crowd actually possessed the desire or the moral courage to stand up alone and cry "Crucify him!" But the political and religious leaders knew well their group psychology, as well as many since.

When we have formed our personal opinion, we feel it is ineffective on its own, so we join it to a group, in spirit as it were, if not actively. We "go along" with popular opinion, nurtured by the press, and when we see our opinion continually



confirmed in the press, we go from strength to strength, and more of us "jump on the band-waggon." More people become active for or against the popular opinion, but the majority just swing along, for various reasons. It becomes fashionable to think in a certain way; we like discussing the matter with our friends, and would hate to lose them; we prefer to agree with them and to be thought of as agreeable; and we avoid the possibility of being considered "old hat."

What we call today the "permissiveness" of society is a live-and-let-live band-waggon with no brakes. It is not surprising that young people should wish to break away from convention and authority to ride upon it, but it is deplorable that so many members of older generations, possessing at least the gift of experience, should make so little effort to restrain the vehicle which threatens to run down and destroy all things of beauty and of good report upon which our civilization has been so laboriously built.

Too often the slightest attempt to question the wisdom of the totally liberal or broad-minded attitude earns the epithet "Victorian"—which is really rather absurd, because some things Victorian were excellent, some good, some bad, and some positively revolting. The perusal of one or two books on the social history of the time would open the eyes of quite a number of people who use the term too lightly. One of the good things which characterised the Victorian era was discipline. Truly it was often harsh, but often it meant precisely what the word comes from: following an example, keeping to the rules and sticking to accepted standards. It is wrong to confuse discipline with punishment; infliction of the latter merely proves the breakdown or non-existence of the former.

When we threw away the bad things of the Victorian era the good things went with them, and what we have left is a void which many different types of us are desperately trying to fill. But since in the final analysis we are on our own, we should exercise self-discipline. If each one of us is to be captain of his soul and master of his fate, let him refuse

to be caught up and swept along with the crowd.

But what if the area in which we can practise self-discipline is being continuously eroded? To exercise self-discipline you need self-responsibility, and self-responsibility stems from freedom of action.

Over the last half century or so, and in particular since the second world war, our rulers have become so obsessed with the idea of controlling everything that the citizen has been weighed down with an ever-increasing number of laws telling him what he must not do. At the same time he has been told that all these restrictions are for his own good, and he has lapsed into accepting the regime of a planned "social order" as the right and proper thing for all concerned. He has also concluded that there is precious little he can do about it anyway.

Government planning of our social and economic lives is not natural, right nor proper and in his innermost being the citizen resents it. Many assert their individuality in every way they can, often masquerading their enterprise and initiative in the courts and prisons, frequently displaying arrogance, rarely remorse.

In whittling away his freedom the State has reduced the citizen's responsibility (just as the prisoner in custody is no longer responsible to himself or to society). A man cannot enjoy freedom without accepting the responsibility of upholding equal freedom for his fellow men, and he cannot exercise his responsibility without his freedom, for the one is complementary to and entirely dependent upon the other.

Why, then, do we have to accept this situation where individual freedom and responsibility cannot be allowed to flourish? The imposition of a restrictive planned economy has one purpose only—to control and divert the course of natural economic laws in the mistaken belief that these natural laws are basically selfish and thus destructive to a community. Yet the plans of the "Big Brother" State continue to misfire; state welfare still fails to cure poverty, to cure social and industrial strife, to cure rocketing land prices and to cure bad housing. The cost of living continues to

rise, and recurring balance of payment crises and devaluations continue to result from the obstinacy of clinging to fixed exchange rates and the Governments debasement of the currency. In its pathetic attempts to implement social justice, the Government, by playing Robin Hood with taxpayers' money, creates more social evils than it attempts to cure.

Such is the position in which the citizen finds himself today. If he wishes to win back his dignity as an individual, and to accept his responsibilities, he must cease to be a mere face in the crowd and demand to be allowed to think and plan his life for himself. When he is able to do this, the crowd will melt away.

#### THEIR'S TO GIVE?

A RECENT press report says that the Victoria State Government have given 100 aborigines the deeds to the 4,000 acre reserve on which they live and work.

#### DO IT YOURSELF INFLATION

COUNTERFEIT money to the tune of £4,160,000 has been seized by the US secret service since December 1 last year, says a recent press report.

A good defence gimmick for the men accused would be to plead they were only helping Nixon to reflate the economy.

#### £15 MILLION ISLAND SITE

CAPITAL and Counties have bought the freehold interest with vacant possession of 32/44 Hans Crescent, Knightsbridge, with a 155 ft. frontage and a site area of about 13,800 sq. ft.

The deal completes the company's freehold ownership of the entire 3.4 acre island site between Sloan Street and Harrods.

This part of the company's Knightsbridge Estate has a current value of more than £15 million.

*Evening Standard, July 26.*