

# Whispering Down Wells

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If you whisper down a well  
About the goods you have to sell  
You will not make as many dollars  
As the man who climbs up a tree and hollers

—Traditional

ONE of the reasons for the disasters which the Free Trade cause (and therefore our country as well) has sustained in the last half century or so has been the coyness of Free Traders themselves. Free Traders, of course, will argue that it would have been better for Britain if we had had Free Trade during that period. Some Free Traders will even be so bold as to say that the abandonment of Free Trade has lain at the root of the slow erosion of Britain's economic position; and a few Free Traders will correctly point out that economic autarchy was the main single cause of the Second World War; and that the development of new supranational Zollvereins like the EEC brings the threat of a Third World War a good deal nearer than would otherwise be the case.

Free Traders are less disposed to push the argument even further. Free Trade, as it was understood by the great Free Traders of the past, is not just a useful policy, or a safe policy, for this country at a particular moment in time; but it is the policy which commends itself to the true interests of the great mass of people of *all* countries at *all* times. Economic "solutions" based on central control and regulations are in almost all cases less satisfactory than solutions based on allowing people to determine their own economic interests.

Too often, Free Traders have allowed the people who favour centralisation to get away with the gigantic fallacy which, more than anything else, has given them their strength and appeal: the fallacy that a system of centralised control will in some way foster the interests of the poor and necessitous. Nothing could be more monstrously wrong. If you have a centralised economy, whether it is run by dictators, by "democratic" politicians, by bureaucrats, by EEC Commissioners, by big businessmen, by Soviet People's Commissars or by anybody else, those people in whose hands the power resides will necessarily and inevitably become subjected to special pleading by interested parties. Broadly speaking, those who will have most influence on the "controllers" will not be the poor and deserving, but those who are already rich and powerful. Why? Because those who are already rich and powerful are most familiar with the

"corridors of power;" and, since they possess the longest purses, they are able to buy the glibbest tongues.

This is not a question of capital versus labour, but a split of interests within capital, and within labour. Sometimes we see the formation of cartels by organised pressure groups, in favour of the interests of one particular industry or section of industry, in which management and workers in that section will join to make a killing at the expense of the consumer, or of other industries which are less well organised. Sometimes one sees people who are already well-heeled using others who are palpably in need as a protection for themselves - like gangsters in a gunfight hiding behind a shield of women and children. A good example of this is provided in agriculture. The public knows well that farm workers and small farmers have a hard life and small remuneration. The NFU is able to tug at the heartstrings when it pleads for "British farming;" while the policies which it advocates will often be of negligible benefit to farm workers or small farmers, yet of great benefit to big farmers and landowners. Sometimes, we see a different pattern. Between the Wars, restrictive policies in many industries pushed up the price of labour. This was beneficial to those who were in work (at least in certain cases); but it also meant that employers cut their staffs to the minimum, and many people were unemployed who in other circumstances would have found a job. Such examples may be multiplied *ad nauseam*.

Many people who would call themselves economic and political radicals will point out - and correctly point out - examples of men who receive much more than they seem to deserve, and examples of men who receive a great deal less than they seem to deserve. Perhaps Mr. X, who is an employer, seems to be getting more than would appear to be his worth, while Mr. Y, who works for Mr. X, appears to be getting much less than his worth. The *fact* of injustice and exploitation is quite obvious. What is necessary is to ask about the *mechanism* of injustice and exploitation. *How* is X able to exploit Y?

Social injustice is a very old phenomenon. It exists in all societies of which we have historical record. It is at least fifty centuries older than "capitalism," and so "capitalism" can hardly be the cause of it. Indeed, it is extremely difficult, from first principles, to discover any mechanism by which X *could* exploit Y through the ownership of capital. If Y is exploited,



then the cause of that exploitation is much more likely to be that he is denied access to something which is indispensable to his prosperity. This may happen in many ways. Perhaps he is denied access to cheap products through import duties; perhaps through some statutory monopoly; perhaps through some Government juggling of the currency. Perhaps there are rules of law which control the circumstances, ways or places in which he may sell his labour. Perhaps Governments make it difficult or impossible for him to obtain access to capital. Another method - and this may be the most important of all, as well as the most ancient - is that Governments may deny him access to the original source of wealth - land.

Let us then stick out our necks, with the real Free Trade challenge to all forms of centralisation of power

and property. Take any injustice you like, in any human society you like. Study not only the *fact* of injustice, and who is exploiting whom, but the *mechanism* by which it was brought about, and by which it is still sustained. In at least 90 per cent of cases, and probably in many more, you will find that the root of the injustice lies in the action of Governments, or of people acting with the authority and support of Governments, who deny others access to the land or to other commodities. In other words, the cause of exploitation is not *too little* regulation and control but *too much*; and the radical answer to social injustice is not to put restrictions on, but to take restrictions off.

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