



The Progress of Unreason

FRANK DUPUIS

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COULD ANY young person in Britain today imagine a world in which the cost of living was stable or gradually decreasing, one without nationwide and recurring strikes in which wages steadily rose; in which the crime rate had been declining for so long it was not a major problem; in which income tax was 1s. 2d. in the £ and so many lower incomes exempt that PAYE was unknown, and the government was striving for a reform that could reduce all taxes on work and its products; in which currency was so genuine one could take a £5 note to the Bank of England and get golden sovereigns for it; in which inflation referred only to bicycle tyres, and economy meant a saving, and "balance of payment crises," "overheated" and "underheated economies," etc., were unheard of; in which, because industrialists knew there was no hope of obtaining subsidies or privileges at the expense of consumers and taxpayers they applied their energies to efficient production not to political intrigue; in which freedom, the dignity of the individual and the character-forming virtues of self reliance were phrases often used by politicians; and in which to surrender any part of British independence to foreign politicians and experts would have seemed as fantastic as the proposition that by subsidising the destruction of food everybody could be made more prosperous?

Yet, although never mentioned on mass communications, such a world is not a picture of the imagination. In Britain before "the lights went out" in 1914 it existed and some elderly people can recall it. In fact, to judge from the clear words then used in public discussion compared with the hazy metaphors now fashionable, one might contend that, in the realm of thought, that world was more real than our's today. We cannot reverse the clock but by reviving common sense we might get nearer to reality, to those essential conditions within which mankind must live; and surely how mankind must live in order to ascend in the scale of his evolution should be the ultimate purpose of social enquiry. Even a person who considers only his material satisfactions might investigate a period when the cost of living was going down, and the reason why. The not so distant past is often less understood than an earlier period.

Today, due probably to the visible evidence of the results of scientific discovery, there is a disposition to

assume that people are so much cleverer than they were, that nothing is beyond the power of human will, that principles previously respected can be ignored, and that past experience is irrelevant to modern times. But the daily news does not show that the world is happier than it was, and if up-to-the-minute man cannot achieve happiness, there is a case for investigating whether he may not have overlooked some factor which governs others affecting the whole of social life. After all, cleverness and wisdom are different things.

In 1914 reality was more perceptible and belief in freedom more genuine. Unlike the situation in some freedom-professing but protectionist countries British freedom could pass the acid test of trade competition. Not only in Britain herself, but wherever her rule extended trade was open to the whole world. The case for freedom of trade rests on common sense but the spirit it evokes goes far beyond the immediate object. Men can nourish a passion for freedom, a passion arising from the deepest urge of self respect. It breeds a deep-rooted suspicion of compulsion and restriction in any form. Rulers must therefore appeal to reason in order to get their measures accepted, and they must use words everyone can understand. So self-thinking is encouraged, and a disposition to investigate causes, rather than assume that consequences create themselves. People in 1914 could not have been persuaded that poor relief, made universal and re-named welfarism, with its infinite series of compulsions, was the answer to the poverty that existed. Compulsion, whether legal or not, is the negation of reason; and the State was not then regarded as the universal provider, schoolmaster and substitute for personal initiative in thought and action. Poor relief had long been in operation. Among working men there were thousands of mutual benefit associations, and there was large-scale genuine charity; but it was not claimed that all these solved the poverty question. Even when war came compulsory service was not imposed.

That five million men should have volunteered, an example unmatched in history, shows there was general confidence in a society imperfect indeed but based on respect for freedom. Where there is such confidence men can see hope for the future and when they see anomalies they are likely to try to amend their society not destroy it. On such a basic subject as the develop-

ment of sound character there was far less complacency than now.

Since the 1880's at least, there had been growing concern with the spectacle of poverty despite general improvement elsewhere. Poverty was not then concealed by artificial means and there was resistance to tax increases which might have provided politicians with those means. There was some concern with the principles and the purpose of taxation. It was supposed to be the method of supplying public revenue, not supplying expertise to promote "economic growth" or damp down the "overheated economy," mysteries beyond the comprehension of those who had to pay. Also land ownership was not so anonymous as it is today. People could see many honest workers living near the poverty line while non-workers lived in luxury. This seemed unnatural and it stimulated enquiry. Eventually so many ordinary citizens perceived the natural method of taxation that could resolve an unnatural situation, that they became a political force and the party which came into power in 1906 was pledged to introduce the necessary legislation. Although the opposition of landowners delayed the legislation until war broke out, the frenzied nature of that opposition must have confirmed to reformers that they were on the right track.

In the later stages of the war compulsory service was imposed together with restrictions on civilians. In the atmosphere of war, standards of thinking and feeling began to fall; faith in freedom was undermined. Under four years of virtual despotism people began to think they need no longer decide public matters for themselves. Mental democracy, without which democracy is a sham, began to wane.

The survivors returned so embittered that instead of seeking causes they looked only for scapegoats. The "old men," (unspecified), were denounced for causing the war. Pre-war ideas became, without discrimination, out-of-date. In the confusion of thought, or lack of it, the intelligentsia, always inclined to undervalue the ordinary person's thoughts and interests, became more influential. The seeds of expert rule were sown. Socialistic ideas, requiring compulsion to operate, began to spread. Without the realisation that it was reactionary, old ideas under new names, though long discarded in the march of progress, were entertained; just as politicians today, struggling with the consequences of the inflation they themselves have caused - an expedient as old as decadent Rome - return to the wage and price fixing common in the Middle Ages. Free trade, the benefits of which when it had been introduced not so very long before were so striking, could not be immediately abandoned; but later, in the early 1930's when the economic blizzard caused a panic perhaps unmatched in modern history, Britain reverted to protectionism and the planned economy; this not-

withstanding that the blizzard had started and was worse in protectionist countries. Mental inertia could hardly go further.

Thus from a generally free society, in which the individual's rights and earnings received consideration, Britain sank to a monopolist or servile society in which "the interests concerned" have preference. With corresponding developments in similar countries some historians have regarded the between-the-wars period as the turning point in Western civilisation.

The quality of a civilisation depends not on technology but on the character of the people; and it is poverty, in the widest sense, which most deeply affects the character of the mass of the people. During that period the search for the cause of poverty was neglected. Beginning gradually but rising in tempo by the end of World War II, welfarism was accepted as the answer.

Welfarism has immense political advantages. It is the best cover-up for basic injustices and it has a built-in defence against criticism. The critic is liable to be denounced by kindly but thoughtless people as callous to human suffering. And in the atmosphere produced by welfarism the rulers are enabled to deal with every difficulty, not by attending to the cause, but by means of taxes, compulsions and restrictions; by subsidies and privileges granted to pressure groups and other sections whose support may be required. And all this is at the expense of everybody's natural right to the value of what he produces. People no longer resist compulsion; they sink into willing servitude of mind and body.

Yet the principle of welfarism is perhaps the crudest ever applied in modern times, although it is the same as that used in the days of "bread and circuses." In a simple society where it would be obvious, such a method could be applied only by naked force.

Nevertheless human nature cannot with impunity be permanently thwarted. There is growing evidence of a feeling that the mere accumulation of material things does not bring happiness. Perhaps this might eventually induce people to investigate social problems by a method now unorthodox: by the method used in science.

This was the method used by Henry George who in a country when it was never so sure of itself foresaw so well that if the ultimate cause of poverty were not removed, civilisation might decay. We can now see, as has been said, "He wrote history in advance."

A writer in the *Times Educational Supplement*, August 1966, reviewing together a socialist book and a new edition of *Progress and Poverty*, says, "It is a relief to turn from the muddled thinking of the former to George's clear, direct and simple expression of a great truth which could be put into practice without violence." It forms "a welcome guide through the maze of present day political expediency."