
NOTES & TOPICS

London Commentary

On Britain's Decline

Democratic Contradictions—By RONALD BUTT



THE FAULT, we have been told these last twenty years at least, lies not in ourselves but in our institutions that we are underlings. Since Britain fell into serious decline, we have been advised successively that, if only we would devise suitable organisations to enable both sides of industry to agree on a national economic plan, or on the control of incomes and prices; or if we would equip the House of Commons with investigative specialist committees on the Washington model; or if we would pass a Bill of Rights; or if we would reform the Civil Service so as to uproot the hegemony of Oxford and Cambridge generalists; or if we would adopt a more proportional electoral system (the latest nostrum) then we could enjoy the kind of renaissance to which our natural virtues as a nation entitle us.

To all this advice we have listened respectfully, giving it the same kind of desperate but confused attention that a possibly hopeless case pays to the distinguished doctor who is suggesting a treatment of last resort. At the drop of a hat by a publisher, editor, or television producer, recipes for institutional regeneration have been produced by economics and politics dons, by professional committee-sitters and by students of Parliament. There has even been some consequential action.

Economically, each recent Government has added something new to the welter of quasi-governmental bodies which exist to promote "growth", to control pay and prices, and to arbitrate on remuneration. Administratively we have reformed the Civil Service, with the kind

assistance of Lord Crowther-Hunt. Politically, the renewed outburst of demands for the reform of parliamentary procedure in the 1960s led Richard Crossman to attempt to establish a few specialist committees to shadow and probe Government departments—though he sensibly did not try to apply one to the economy (since it would be bound to divide on party lines under our parliamentary system, as it does not where the American President is not dependent on Congressional votes for survival).

Yet it cannot be said that any of these changes have done anything of substance to improve the state of Britain which has, indeed, steadily deteriorated while we have tinkered with institution-building. In fact, the solution of political problems by reform of parliamentary procedure has now fallen somewhat out of fashion, and radical opinion has modulated to a new theme.

THE ARGUMENT HAS MOVED to electoral reform as a means of producing a system of parliamentary representation that can be said to reflect more accurately the proportion of votes cast for the various parties. It is, however, agreed by respectable opinion that popular voting (actual or potential) should not be represented *too* accurately. We are therefore advised to adopt some such system as the German (on which the "Blak-Hansard Society model" is based), with built-in devices to exclude extremist parties and to prevent the proliferation of parties that would fragment the House of Commons. Ideally, what is needed (say the advocates of electoral reform, who include Tories driven to it by the large loss of votes to the Liberals which caused their defeat in 1974) is a three-party system, allowing a much bigger place to the centre-Liberal party. That this would probably give the centre-Liberal party an almost permanently decisive role in determining which of the other two parties it was prepared to put into coalition office does not appear to worry Conservative electoral reformers. Their German equivalent (more or less) in the Christian

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Democratic Union may look enviously on our system, fearful lest theirs may keep them persistently out of office as a result of the German Liberal (FDP) and Social Democratic alliance—but this does not make our own Conservative electoral reformers pause. The fact that the sort of Liberal Party led by Mr David Steel (a social democrat in spirit) would almost certainly behave likewise with the Labour Party does not disturb such Tories. For them, reform is largely a device to neutralise the Labour Left and that seems to be a sufficient political goal for them.

IN SHORT, parliamentary reform is seen as a desirable way of creating a permanent hegemony of passionate moderates, cast in the collective image of Mr Roy Jenkins, Mr David Steel, Mrs Shirley Williams, and Lord (Robert) Carr. The fact that the consequence would almost certainly be to maintain coalitions in power (at least, until something gave under the strain) is not seen as a disadvantage. For the object of the change is to enthrone “moderation” and to avoid too many changes of policy which (say the advocates of electoral reform) are bad for Britain. Now as it happens, here is the first clue to what is really wrong with Britain. For ought not the electorate to have a genuine chance to choose between genuinely different policies, and to elect new governments to reverse policies? In a true democracy, the answer must surely be that it ought—which suggests that a true democracy is not quite what moderates, centrists, and electoral reformers are really after.

SUCH, THEN, ARE some of the mechanistic solutions that are advanced for dealing with the British sickness. The one explanation seldom contemplated, and which most people are unwilling to countenance, is that we are in a decline as a result of one of those historic shifts in the temper and psyche of a nation for which there is no easy explanation, and no simple institutional cure. Yet all the outward signs suggest that we have fallen into the sort of condition in which the essential cement of a society tends to crumble, its cohesion to be damaged, and its will to be gravely weakened, if not destroyed. Our society is one that shows every sign of a “failure of nerve” in those who have responsibility for government, and an atrophy in the sense of purpose and loyalty among the governed. We summon up enough energy to get over immediate short-term crises; but we make no serious effort to mend our ways and our habits of behaviour, and show no confidence in the possibility of curing the basic disease—the dispassionate study of which, as though it had nothing to do with ourselves, has now become something like a national hobby.

Other European countries also have their own brand of unease, their fear of violence and instability. Even so, Britain shows every sign of a destruction of individual, civic, and productive energy which is exceptional on any comparison with those European states most like ourselves. Sophisticated liberal Americans, who enjoy falling in love with our way of life, much as a visitor from the big city falls in love with the quaintness of half-timbered rural squalor, sometimes argue that we really like things as they are because we have maturely discovered that there is more to life than the rat-race of working, making-it, and spending. They certainly make it quite clear that they would like us to like it as it is. The managers of Pan-Am understandably pitched into the inefficiencies of Heathrow airport during this winter’s snow-up as inexcusable and unparalleled anywhere else in Europe; but the sentimental American seems to assume that we like doing things badly and lethargically.

Yet I think we do not. Some of us might prefer to live in a non-industrial society, but if we are living in an industrial society there is not much to be said for living in it inefficiently. We are therefore not proud of our poor performance or of the assumption we have about each other most of the time, that goods and services will not turn up when they are due, and that undertakings will not be fulfilled. Most of us find it dispiriting to live in a community that is crippled by strikes each winter, that has its honesty destroyed by inflation—and I doubt whether many of us are indifferent to the dirty streets, the telephones that do not work, and the grubby underground stations. I do not think we like a society in which the old, the sick, and the poor are the main hostages in the power-struggle for wages. We may feel too dispirited to do anything about these things, but we do not enjoy them.

Such an extraordinary disintegration of will and of the sense of community—so remarkable a lapse from any agreed framework of civic and personal morality—can, of course, be most obviously ascribed to the decline of religious (and therefore moral) certainties, and to the discrediting of patriotism. No society prospers self-confidently without a basis of shared values, and without an appeal to these values, implicitly or explicitly, by its government. We do not have to like Communist societies to accept that much of their strength and self-confidence arises from their claim to a basis of moral certainty. Such was also once the claim of the free Western societies. But it is hard to discern anything that can seriously be regarded as a generally shared basis of moral values in Britain as a community today.

THE DEEPER TRUTH, HOWEVER, is that no government, arbitrary or free, succeeds except on the basis of consent—whether consent is secured by force or

by propaganda, or whether it is freely given. In Britain there are now signs that sections of the nation and individuals have, where they can get away with it, withdrawn their consent to the sort of government they have. They are seeking their own solutions to their own problems in their own interest as best they can, regardless of others, in the belief that everyone else is doing likewise.

At every stage of our history, obtaining the necessary consent has been the basis of successful government. The Witan and the medieval King's Council were not elected bodies; they were the King's appointments. Yet in a deeper sense they also had a "representative" function since the King naturally summoned to advise him those who, if they were not consulted, and did not give their consent, had the power and the following to upset his government. Later, when knights and burgesses were summoned to Parliament, it was not in obedience to a theory of civil liberties but because it was sensible to summon them to make sure that the required taxes could be levied and collected with their help. Later still, when Parliament won its crucial liberties from the Crown, it was because the facts of powers were on the side of those limited classes who were directly represented there. Finally, the necessity to ensure consent for government obliged these classes in turn to widen the franchise until at last parliamentary democracy was created.

YET NOW, to our bewilderment, we are seeing that in some way that we do not quite understand, parliamentary democracy is not working. It is not providing consent. This amazes us since we assume that we know all about parliamentary democracy. It is, we suppose, deep-rooted in us. We know about liberty and the law; about Magna Carta and Habeas Corpus and an unarmed police. How can so old and tried a system not be working?

THE ANSWER IS, of course, that though Parliament is at least seven centuries old, democracy has been grafted on to it only very recently. It is not more than 60 years old if it is dated from universal male and partial female suffrage in 1918; it is barely 50 years old if it is dated from suffrage for all women equally. And it is arguable that Parliament worked better and controlled the government more effectively when it represented a smaller and more compact political nation than it does now.

It is not hard to see why. Democracy which is still experimental has been obliged to work crudely through huge national parties appealing for mass votes. These parties have been obliged to average out and weaken their political offerings so as to appeal to the largest possible number, and the

worst consequence of this has been the subjection, by both parties, of policies for economic management to the need for maximum popularity. Further, these parties have agglomerated power and responsibility for almost every important aspect of each individual's life and have been unable to use it properly. They have laid down criteria that they have been unable to satisfy, and raised hopes they could not fulfil.

The state has assumed responsibility for universal education, health care, accommodation, full employment and industrial growth; but it has been unable to discharge that responsibility adequately because both politicians and public have acted as though the resources needed would be available irrespective of willingness to impose the disciplines to provide them. Neither the self-discipline adopted by an individual to achieve his chosen ends nor the discipline imposed by the state to realise its objectives in a more arbitrary society have been applied.

The problem is essentially one of social democracy—by which I do not narrowly mean the sort of right-wing socialism favoured by (say) Mrs Shirley Williams, but rather the particular kind of social state that has grown up in Britain, and which Conservative as well as Labour Governments have furthered, even though its roots were planted by the Attlee Government. It must also be stressed that I am not attacking state responsibility for welfare in what might be called conventional free-market terms. It obviously makes no sense to lay all Britain's ills at the door of social democracy in that sense when we observe that other European countries also operate social democracy to provide the basis for every citizen's welfare, and yet do not suffer from the kind of enervated malaise that afflicts us.

Germany, for instance, is a social-democratic state in a sense that has nothing to do with the fact that a Social Democratic party happens to be in power there now. Indeed, Germany has had a "welfare state" tradition since Bismarck's provisions for pensions and state insurance; and Germany today has a constitution that is built on the assertion that it is a "social state based on the rule of law" and gives the state a special obligation to



enable each individual to live a life of human dignity. Germany provides for the existence of a welfare system that includes a state health insurance scheme, insurance to cover the loss of earnings, and a better state pension than we have.

In Germany, however, social security rests on a much more genuine contribution principle than it does here. It does not operate at the expense of financial rectitude; it does not carry a deadweight of bureaucracy as ours does; it is not accompanied by the direct involvement of the state in industry. The economic function of the state is rather to determine the financial conditions under which private industry works; to provide "global guidance" for industry to work competitively; and to keep inflation at bay.

PART OF Britain's problem, then, arises from the fact that we have a form of social democracy that operates without proper regard for accountability and responsibility. But it would be quite wrong to go on from that to suppose that the answer is to diminish the state's function of providing the framework, the guarantees, and the conditions of social security. If we are to revive *consent for government*, such concern should become more effective, not less. It is the form that should change, not the objective.

The failure of the "welfare state" as we know it is one consequence of a wider failure to respond, through the framework of parliamentary democracy, to the needs of various classes in society to which an adequate response must be made if we are to return to social stability. It is the failure to respond in this way that has led to the breakdown of consent and the fragmentation of the old national loyalty into rival sectional interests. This is fundamentally a political problem to which no politicians have responded with imagination. Instead, they have deliberately removed from the individual his capacity to look after himself and have handed it to the state, which has then delivered sub-standard goods.

At the same time, the income that the individual is allowed to earn is cursorily controlled to make good the state's lapse into inflation; and the politicians, instead of trusting social and parliamentary democracy, have deliberately concentrated on bargaining with sectional interests, which they have built up in the process. They have done everything they could to encourage management to deal with Unions rather than individuals; and they have done nothing to encourage management to turn to any useful kind of industrial participation that would help the individual worker to accept that the prosperity of his work-place is his own prosperity. In these circumstances, is it surprising that so many have preferred to give their principal obedience and loyalty to their Union instead of to the Community?

THERE IS, HOWEVER, another way in which the politicians have deliberately refused to respond to public opinion and instincts. Far too often they have abdicated their power on social questions that affect the lives and happiness of the majority of citizens to unrepresentative pressure groups and to the demands of minority opinion (often because of the power that these groups exert through the media of communications). What ought to be essentially political questions because they concern policy and the community have been handed over to the discretion of what is regarded as "expert" or "objective" or so-called neutral opinion. Popular opinion has been spurned and the classic illustration of this process has been seen in the response of successive governments to public concern over immigration.

IF, THIRTY YEARS AGO, it had been put to the electorate that future policy would allow the creation of an immigrant community of the size we have had today (whether the accepted figures are of the "conservative" dimension favoured by the Home Office and the Runnymede Trust, or whether they are those suggested by Mr Enoch Powell, or whether they lie somewhere between these two) it is quite inconceivable that the public would have acquiesced in the light of the tensions that would be bound to arise from immigration (of whatever sort) on such a scale.

Tactics were therefore adopted which deliberately smothered and circumvented public opinion. It was said that controls were "racialist" and that they were unnecessary because the numbers involved were not significant—though whether, if the numbers could have been proved to be significant, the "racialist" argument would still have been maintained is anyone's guess. It was first said that there was "no problem" and every measure of control was fought in such a way as to make it ineffective. Then, when it was undeniable that a "community problem" had been created, it was said that it was too late to talk about strengthening future controls and that it was right, instead, to concentrate on laws to impose "good race relations."

In other social matters of importance to the life of the ordinary working citizen, the responses have also not been to democracy but to the dominant pressure groups which are the arbiters of "liberal" standards. This is true about the removal of almost all restraints on what may be published and sold, however obscene and brutal. It is true about government administration and law-making that affects family life (for instance, in the authorisation by the Department of Health and Social Security for doctors to ignore the legal age of consent and prescribe contraceptives for under-age children without informing parents).

THE APPROVED PRESSURE GROUPS, many of which have over-lapping membership, are very powerful. They have close connections with Whitehall and with the media which often seek their guidance as a kind of “expert” incontrovertible high truth. The result has been the fashioning of a society from which too many people feel alienated and from which the roots of traditional feelings and instincts have been too brutally cut away.

Yet any nation or tribe needs its own roots if it is to survive healthily. Even the rapidity with which Britain has been turned into a multi-racial community is bound to encourage separate loyalties which do not assist cohesion. To say as much is, of course, to provoke the wrath of the righteous; it is to break one of the few taboos encouraged by the new liberal establishment. Yet if a distinguished historian of Anglo-Saxon England can account for the greater stability of Wessex compared with Northumbria by Wessex’s greater ethnic homogeneity, may we not at least consider objectively whether the same principle is applicable to the growth of separate ethnic communities and loyalties in Britain today?

ALL THESE PROBLEMS have arisen not from the mechanics of our parliamentary institutions but from the failure of the political parties using them to give proper leadership to democracy, which means responding to the nation’s legitimate instincts (all communities in it) as well as directing them. Instead, we have been offered a simulacrum of democracy under the cloak of which the real direction of society is determined by the manoeuvres of unrepresentative bodies, while the politicians concentrate on manipulating the economy to help them buy votes. Any proposal to respond candidly to popular feelings is dismissed (to borrow the words of Mr Roy Hattersley) as “vulgar populism.” It is hardly surprising if people feel that the idea of democracy raised hopes which the practice of politicians has dashed.

In his distinguished book *Democracy Ancient and Modern* Professor M. I. Finley challenged the élitist view of democracy, drew some important lessons from the ancient Athenian experience, and quoted a passage from an article with the “revealing” title “In Defence of Apathy”, by W. H. Morris Jones, a political scientist. This suggested that “many of the ideas connected with the general theme of a Duty to Vote belong properly to the totalitarian camp and are out of place in the vocabulary of liberal democracy. . . .” Political apathy is “a sign of understanding and tolerance of human variety”, and has a “beneficial effect on the tone of political life” because it is a “more or less effective counter-force to the fanatics who constitute the real danger to liberal democracy.”

THAT, I THINK, sums it up. The “liberal” establishment has relied on the apathy of the electorate to enable it to re-shape society to an approved model—only to find that its control of events is now disintegrating. Parliamentary democracy is going wrong not because it is too democratic but because it is not democratic enough; because it is too often used as a façade behind which devoted campaigners of minority interests can bring the sort of society they approve of into existence without any real reference to the people. Old loyalties, old patriotism, and old nationhood have been cut up and a “new society” that is both alienated and in danger of fragmentation has been bribed by consumer booms, punished by curbs and controls, and deprived of responsibility. When a trade union offers a clear-cut notion of belonging (even if it is directed against members of other unions) in such a society—when each individual comes to think that trying hard is no longer worthwhile because the other chap will only do the minimum—is it surprising that society is staggering? The fault is not too much democracy but too little.

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BOOKS & WRITERS

Scandalising Samuel Beckett

The Coarse Art of Biography—By MARTIN ESSLIN

“RUNNING to 640 pages with another 80 pages of notes”, said Irving Wardle in *The Times* (25 September 1978), “the book has all the appearance of a work of scholarship, and it is no pleasure to me to record that when I made a sample check with two much-quoted British sources, both vehemently dissociated themselves from it. . . .” Note: all the *appearance* of scholarship, but when a check is made, the check bounces. Yet with the customary kindness and fairness of British courtesy, Irving Wardle then breezily brushed any doubts aside: “That is worrying, but I think it is outweighed by the fact that Dr Bair is manifestly a lover of Beckett’s work and that the story she tells is too extraordinary for anyone, least of all a celebrity-hunting hack, to have invented” Note: inaccuracy of fact can be outweighed by the author of a biography seeming to like its subject. Strange logic indeed! And stranger still: an *ordinary* story could have been invented; but an extraordinary story is just too extraordinary for that. Well, let us have a look at the evidence.

Reviewing Deirdre Bair’s biography, *Samuel Beckett*,¹ in the *Herald Tribune* of 29 June 1978, A. J. Leventhal, one of Beckett’s oldest and closest friends, wrote:

Miss Bair tells an extraordinary story of Beckett’s first meeting with the woman who was to become his wife. As the writer lay bleeding on the ground [having been stabbed in a Paris street by a pimp] a young woman appeared providentially on the scene, she “happened by” in the biographer’s words. Calmly she took over from Beckett’s distraught companions, pillowed the victim on a borrowed overcoat and called an ambulance. The seeds for romance were planted. So far the Myth. One that persists like the one that makes Beckett Joyce’s secretary. The facts are that Beckett met Suzanne Dumesnil on a previous occasion, that the latter learned of the

incident in the newspapers and hurried to the hospital to be of help. . . .

So much for the remarkable view that the “extraordinariness” of a story is a guarantee of its truth, a view incidentally which seems to be shared by other reviewers, e.g. Professor Christopher Ricks who remarked, in *The Sunday Times* (17 September 1978), that the book “may be indiscriminate, chatty, sometimes inaccurate, but it does bring together an extraordinary amount of fascinating material—people, letters, incidents, mysteries. . . .” The inaccuracy of the material pales, in Professor Ricks’ view, before its fascination, enabling him to conclude: “Deirdre Bair has a gripping, clawing tale to tell” (including the story of the miraculous rescue by an unknown maiden “happening by” on the scene of the stabbing, which he has swallowed hook, line and sinker as evidenced by the fact that he singles it out for special mention).

But is this not a scholarly book, as indicated by more than 80 pages of footnotes? These, as Irving Wardle so rightly noticed, provide the *appearance* of scholarliness. But let us see how the obviously false, over-romanticised story is backed up in these notes. The relevant footnote states that “among those whose interviews helped me to form an interpretation of the stabbing incident are . . .”—and there follow seven names—“also Samuel Beckett’s letters to Thomas McGreevy, George Reavey and Arland Ussher.” Clearly the information supplied by these sources was wrong, or it was wrongly “interpreted.” Here another observation in A. J. Leventhal’s critique becomes relevant: “. . . there are so many errors in the remarks that I myself am supposed to have made that I am driven to doubt the accuracy of other attributions.”

The vast bulk of the hundreds of footnotes in the 80 pages of notes that give the book its appearance of scholarliness are in fact references to such remarks made in conversation with the author. So in point of fact these footnotes represent mostly hearsay evidence wrongly “interpreted” (in other

¹ *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. By DEIRDRE BAIR. Jonathan Cape, £8.50; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich \$19.95.